



Remarks on *The New Zealand Lectures on Disarmament*

By

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New Zealanders, of course, are hardly strangers to disarmament, and I am not referring just to the country's voices and votes in the United Nations disarmament machinery. There is a unity of purpose in New Zealand's longstanding approach to disarmament that makes it a model for other countries. This is apparent in the cross-party consensus in support of global nuclear disarmament, and most significantly, in the harmony that exists between New Zealand's foreign and domestic policies on this issue. It is reflected in the country's nuclear-free zone legislation adopted in 1987, in its successful efforts to put a halt to nuclear testing in the Pacific, in its principled response to the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*, in its important contributions to the work of the New Agenda Coalition, and of course in the country's consistent support for a strong United Nations role in this field.

With this superlative track record, I required very little convincing that the time had come for me to visit New Zealand, to thank its people and government for what they have been doing in the disarmament field, and to listen to their ideas on some next steps forward in this difficult field. This led to my visit last April to several cities in New Zealand to deliver six lectures on nuclear disarmament, in venues such as the national Parliament and university campuses in cities across the country, with audiences including policy-makers, faculty members, students and interested members of civil society. Last June, the UN's Office for Disarmament Affairs published these lectures as an Occasional Paper.¹ I wish to express my gratitude to New Zealand for facilitating those lectures and today's event as well.

My New Zealand lectures addressed many dimensions of the challenge of achieving global nuclear disarmament. I delved into the prospects, possibilities and potential pitfalls of disarmament. I identified a new beast that I called "the disarmament taboo". I discussed the role of parliamentarians in promoting a nuclear-weapon-free world, while also making the case for disarmament education. During my stay in that hospitable country, I also reached out to the general public through interviews with local and national media. My goal today is not just to summarize those lectures, but to build on them and address some wider issues.

Disarmament has been among the oldest and most persistent goals of the United Nations. The term appears twice in the Charter along with a separate goal called "the regulation of armaments", often called conventional arms control. Both remain our common goals today. The importance of these causes cannot be overstated. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has underscored the special importance of nuclear disarmament, calling it "a global public good of the highest order", stressing that it would serve the interests of all States.

Yet while our basic goals have remained constant, the disarmament field is always facing new challenges, both technological and political. We are confronted with rapidly emerging developments around the world, such as the violence in Ukraine, and the difficulties encountered in advancing nuclear arms reductions between the United States and Russia, which together possess over 90 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons. We see conditions just short of chaos and anarchy in the Middle East, with civilians—as always—paying the highest price.

Even the weapons themselves are constantly subject to change and innovation. I am referring here not just to the various nuclear weapon "modernization" programmes underway around the world, but also to the development of new weaponry, including autonomous

¹ "The New Zealand Lectures on Disarmament", Occasional Paper No. 26, June 2014, <http://www.un.org/disarmament/publications/occasionalpapers/26/>

weapons or killer robots, as some call them. Other disturbing technological trends can be observed in nanotechnology, laser weapons and cyber weaponry, to name a few.

Other challenges are more economic in nature—last year, for example, global military spending exceeded \$1.7 trillion, which averages more than \$4.6 billion in just a single day. Think about that—this *daily* figure for arms expenditures is about twice the regular budget of the United Nations for *an entire year*. With good reason, our Secretary-General has often stated that “the world is over-armed and peace is under-funded”.

Lastly, the disarmament agenda has widened over the years—stretching our limited resources. We are confronting persisting and evolving challenges relating to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We are also seeking to prevent non-State actors from acquiring and using such weapons. And new types of weapons are constantly appearing.

In most studies about disarmament, experts conclude that the greatest barrier to progress is lack of political will. There is a lot of truth in this. Perhaps the best indicator of this is seen in the mismatch between the international commitments made by States to pursue nuclear disarmament, versus the lack of domestic laws, regulations, institutions, budgets, and plans for actually achieving this goal. This was a point I made in my lecture at Victoria University in Wellington last April—a problem I called the lack of “congruence”.

Yet that is not to only barrier to political will. In another of my lectures, at the University of Otago in Dunedin, I discussed what I call the “disarmament taboo”. Let’s be honest—disarmament has an image problem. I’ve noticed a reluctance of some States and even some non-governmental organizations to address disarmament as a high priority—some may view it as an overly idealistic goal, a utopian dream, a “divisive” issue, a needless source of controversy, a challenge that is just “too complex”, or most candidly, a lost cause.

The more I think about it, overcoming this taboo and achieving congruence of policies may well be the most formidable challenges we face in disarmament. We need to look closely at those challenges, because frankly the disarmament process needs some revitalization—we need to work together to extract it from the great ditch into which it has strayed over the years.

Consider for a moment where we stand today with respect to weapons of mass destruction. Any fair assessment would have to recognize that there have in fact been some significant achievements in our journey before entering that ditch. The Chemical Weapons Convention and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for example, have almost as many parties as the UN Charter itself, and the Biological Weapons Convention is not far behind. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) has been signed by no less than 183 countries. It is very positive indeed that five regional nuclear-weapon-free zones exist in this world. We are witnessing a tidal wave of support worldwide for a strategy of nuclear disarmament based on concerns over the catastrophic humanitarian effects of such weapons. We have made some welcome progress in the regulation of conventional arms, notably the successful conclusion of the Arms Trade Treaty. Moreover, optimists among us would note the widespread recognition of the applicability of international law to deal with emerging issues, such as the development and proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles. And we have witnessed some progress in disarmament education, which my office has been promoting.

You pessimists among us, however, would point out that there are still some fundamental shortcomings regarding reducing weapons of mass destruction. The Biological Weapons Convention did not establish a verification system. With regard to chemical weapons, pessimists would argue that the Chemical Weapons Convention norm is not quite as robust and universally observed as many claim, taking into account the actual use of such weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, the two countries with the biggest stockpiles of chemical weapons, the Russian Federation and the United States, have encountered numerous delays in implementing their disarmament commitments under the CWC and still have a way to go to the total elimination of chemical weapons.

Furthermore, pessimists argue that the very fact that many thousands nuclear weapons still exist is itself significant, given that efforts have been under way at the United Nations since 1946 not just to limit but to eliminate them. In addition, while the NPT has been in force for 44 years now, the obligation to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament has still not been fulfilled. And as for transparency, nobody really knows how many nuclear weapons there are in the world. There is also much work to do in strengthening the rule of law in nuclear disarmament per se—the CTBT has still not entered into force; and there are no negotiations on either a fissile material treaty or a nuclear weapons convention or a related framework of agreements with the same goal.

These arguments to some extent reflect the impact of the disarmament taboo. Yet pessimists also dismiss non-proliferation, typically pointing to the nuclear tests and ongoing missile developments in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as an example of a failed policy. In the Middle East, while the removal and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons was welcomed everywhere, there has still been no conference on establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the region, as decided at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. We are still waiting for a negotiated solution to put to rest the concerns over the nuclear programme in Iran. And with respect to conventional arms, pessimists argue that while the ATT was a step forward, there remains no multilateral treaty requiring the reduction of conventional arms and in many countries large new orders for conventional arms exports are joyously welcomed as good for jobs, foreign exchange, and political influence.

Frankly, I am concerned that this old debate between the optimists and the pessimists—if allowed to persist endlessly—will do little to revive disarmament efforts in the years ahead. It is in just this type of political climate that bold, ambitious initiatives—such as the Secretary-General's five-point nuclear disarmament proposal in October 2008—get swept aside for alternatives that are presented as more practical or realistic. This includes what is called the “step-by-step” approach to nuclear disarmament, which casts elimination and abolition as remote goals to be pursued only after satisfying an endless list of preconditions. The risk, of course, is that this kind of step-by-step nuclear disarmament will be accompanied by a step-by-step proliferation of nuclear weapons and other WMD.

If we wish a different outcome, if we truly wish to extract disarmament from the ditch of inaction where it now lies, we need a vision that fires the imagination and inspires action at all levels of political activity. A step-by-step process that looks very much like the status quo is not likely to suffice to achieve this goal.

A different type of step-by-step process, however, just might have a chance to succeed. Disarmament commitments have already been made. Little is achieved by simply

reiterating them. What is needed most is some accountability in actually fulfilling those commitments—there is truth in that old proverb that actions speak louder than words. In multilateral arenas like the UN disarmament machinery and the NPT conferences, we need an ongoing review and assessment of concrete progress in eliminating nuclear weapons and their delivery systems and in halting the production of fissile materials and disposing of existing stockpiles. There have already been some excellent civil society reports on these subjects—including by Reaching Critical Will—that point out clearly where greater progress is needed.

We need real evidence that disarmament is in fact underway, and that it is much more than simply a distant goal to be pursued by baby steps, which every parent knows have a tendency to move both forward and backward.

I believe that the world is listening to Ban Ki-moon's words and is increasingly sharing his vision. I see evidence of this in the resolutions that have been adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in support of his initiative, and this support certainly includes the Parliament of New Zealand. Another remarkable initiative is Mayors for Peace, consisting of representatives from over 6,300 city governments around the world, which promotes the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention. We could well be facing a "perfect storm" for advancing these goals through cooperative action on three levels: civil society pressure from the bottom-up, diplomatic engagement by diverse coalitions of States from the outside-in, and some enlightened leadership from the States with the largest weapons stockpiles and military expenditure, from the top-down. Combined with a sustained effort to broaden the political constituency base to include more diverse groups, this is what is most needed to achieve real progress in eliminating all WMD and limiting conventional arms.

Do not despair. There are today enormous possibilities for progress in the field of disarmament: opportunities abound. I will give just two examples.

First, as I briefly noted earlier, States and civil society groups have been persistently advocating a focus on the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, in particular the human and environmental effects of even a small and localized nuclear war. This taps into the inherently indiscriminate nature of nuclear weapons and thus their fundamental inconsistency with the most basic principles of international humanitarian law. This approach also offers the possibility of expanding the disarmament constituency worldwide. It constitutes a potential bridge-builder, a political means to draw together the diverse interest groups under the common goal of strengthening and implementing international humanitarian law through disarmament and thus substantially contribute to the move towards a global nuclear-weapon-free zone.

Second, nuclear weapons are expensive and come with huge opportunity costs. Fifteen years ago, the Brookings Institution calculated that the total historical United States expenditure—remember, this is just one country—on nuclear weapons constitutes \$5.6 trillion. Translated in a stack of dollar bills, this stack reaches from the Earth to the Moon and almost all the way back. In our current financial climate, one can easily imagine alternative purposes in which to invest such resources. As we reflect back on the extent that the Millennium Development Goals fell short of achievement due to the lack of resources, and as we consider the prospects for achieving the new Sustainable Development Goals after 2015, I hope to see a growing public debate over fundamental budget priorities, a debate that will re-direct public investments into people and away from weapons.

Is this too much to expect? I don't think so and in all likelihood neither do you in this audience today. So let's get to work, guided by the conviction that our cause is just and worthy of the respect of our fellow citizens everywhere and future generations.

Thank you all for your interest in disarmament.