



United Nations Disarmament Commission

Opening Remarks

By

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It is an honour to once again address the Disarmament Commission as it opens its 2015 substantive session. I commend the departing Chairman, Ambassador [Vladimir] Drobnyak, for his dedicated stewardship of the work of this Commission, and recognize with appreciation the many efforts of his Bureau, especially the chairs of the two Working Groups, Ambassador [Naif bin Bandar] Al-Sudairy and Mr. [Knut] Langeland.

I also wish to congratulate Ambassador [Fode] Seck on his election as the Chairman of the 2015 session. The Office of Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist the Chairman, the Bureau, and all delegations throughout this session.

One of my first statements as High Representative was to this body in 2012, at the commencement of the Commission's last cycle. I will be the first to admit that the intervening three years have not been the best of times for disarmament.

The prospects for further nuclear arms reductions are dim and we may even be witnessing a roll-back of the hard-won disarmament gains of the last twenty-five years. I have never seen a wider divide between nuclear haves and nuclear have-nots over the scale and pace of nuclear disarmament. This schism is reflected here in the Commission and continues to act as a significant brake on forward movement.

The NPT Review Conference, less than one month away, will need to find a way to bridge the fissure between those states parties that continue to support a step-by-step approach to disarmament and see the action plan agreed at the last Review Conference in 2010 as a long-term goal, and those states parties – the overwhelmingly majority, I might add – that do not view the action plan as an open-ended commitment and demand concrete evidence that binding commitments made under Article VI of the Treaty are being fulfilled.

Turning to the issue of conventional weapons, we are flooded daily with images of the brutal and internecine regional conflicts bedevilling the globe – conflicts fuelled by unregulated and illegal arms flows. It is estimated that more than 740,000 men, women, and children die each year as a result of armed violence.

However, in the midst of these dark clouds, I have seen some genuine bright spots during my tenure as High Representative. The bitter conflict in Syria will not, in the words of the Secretary-General, be brought to a close without an inclusive and Syrian-led political process, but Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, facilitated by the Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons agreed upon between the Russian Federation and the United States of America, has been one positive outcome from this bloody conflict. We have seen the complete removal of all declared chemicals from Syria and the commencement of a process to destroy all of Syria's chemical weapons production facilities.

Emerging from the so-called 'disarmament malaise', the humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament, supported by a clear majority of States – as illustrated by the 155 States that supported New Zealand's statement in the First Committee – has continued to gather momentum. This is not a distraction from the so-called 'realist' politics of nuclear disarmament. Rather, it is an approach that seeks to underscore the devastating human impact of nuclear weapons and ground them in international humanitarian law. This

movement is supported by almost 80 percent of UN member states. The numbers cannot be ignored.

One of the international community's major achievements in the last year has been to bring the Arms Trade Treaty into force only a year and a half after it was negotiated. This truly historic treaty will play a critical role in ensuring that all actors involved in the arms trade must be held accountable and must be expected to comply with internationally agreed standards. For example, by ensuring that their arms exports are not going to be used to violate arms embargoes or to fuel conflict and by exercising better control over arms and ammunition imports in order to prevent diversion or re-transfers to unauthorized users.

To my mind, these achievements all highlight the possibility of achieving breakthroughs in disarmament and non-proliferation even in the most trying of international climates.

Today is the last time I will address this body and it is with considerable regret that I must, once again, note the Commission's absence of consensus in pursuing its mandate. It is disheartening to see the Commission devolve into an annual procedural box-checking exercise. We are unfortunately witnessing a triumph of ritual over concrete results.

But, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Marc Anthony, I come neither to bury the Disarmament Commission nor to praise it, but to encourage it and to cajole it.

The Commission has an integral role to play in the United Nations disarmament machinery. Its development of guidelines and recommendations has the potential to inspire future General Assembly resolutions, while also preparing the ground for new multilateral treaties. Fulfilling this potential, however, will require the Commission to work actively to seek compromises that will expand our common ground.

It is worth recalling that between 1979 and 1999, the Commission was exceptionally active. It was able to adopt 16 guidelines, recommendations and declarations across a wide array of vital issues, many of them agreed upon during the height of Cold War tensions.

If these results could be achieved during such difficult times, surely they can be achieved today.

By adopting a new three-year cycle deliberative agenda, the Commission can collectively cast its vote for multilateralism, for disarmament as an essential means to strengthen international peace and security, and for the United Nations as an indispensable common forum for the pursuit of common interests.

As recommended by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/77, the Commission should direct its attention to more specific subjects providing for focused deliberations and keeping in mind the proposal to include a third agenda item.

Should the Commission decide to pursue this route there is an abundance of issues to choose from, including the reports of various Groups of Governmental Experts on topics ranging from disarmament and development, to outer space and the reduction of military budgets.

Alternatively, the Commission could choose to tackle one of the emerging international security threats of the 21st century, prominent among which are cyber threats and the evolving use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

The point I am trying to make is that in an ever growing complicated international security environment, the Disarmament Commission, as a key component of the UN disarmament machinery, has an increasingly important function to deliberate and make recommendations that benefit our collective security.

I welcome the Commission's efforts to consider how to enhance its efficiency and encourage you to seek new and innovative ideas. However, procedural change without corresponding substantive achievement will mean little in the grander scheme of things. What is required is the political will of Member States to take us out of the current morass and produce tangible results capable of advancing the important disarmament issues of the day.

They may be rare, but I have seen real efforts towards compromise and cooperation during my time as High Representative. Each of these initiatives has resulted in the enhanced security of all States. While the chasm between positions can seem wide, it is your duty to bridge it.

Make this your legacy. In the Office of Disarmament Affairs you have a ready and willing ally.