Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva

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Mr President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are living in tense times.

The Ukraine conflict, Syria, Iraq, the advance of the ISIS terrorist group in the Middle East and Boko Haram in Africa – we face a large number of international crises, a situation we have not had to deal with before in the recent past.

It goes without saying that we have to respond urgently to these crises. Yet at the same time, we have to ask ourselves whether what we are experiencing is a coincidental accumulation of concurrent crises, or whether it is a systematic eruption of forces and tensions in a world in which structures of order are increasingly losing influence. We also have to find answers to this bigger question. For a world that is changing at increasing speed and becoming more and more closely interconnected needs a new order – an order based on rules and law, reliability and trust.

I am convinced that when it comes to this difficult task disarmament and arms control is a field from which international politics can learn! For in the area of disarmament the most important principle of an international order – multilateralism – has been broadly applied for many decades.

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Herein and in its unique success stories in nuclear disarmament lies the great significance of this Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. It is and has always been a laboratory of multilateralism –

also and especially in difficult times.

This Conference on Disarmament is by no means an event only for when the going is good!

In the midst of the Cold War it overcame the rifts between East and West to encourage cooperation between states and strengthen trust. It elaborated rules and tools for an international peaceful order, which we need so urgently today.

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Let me cite just two examples:

Firstly, the Non-Proliferation Treaty has made an almost unparalleled contribution to making our world a safer place. This work has to continue! For although arsenals have diminished by around two-thirds since the end of the Cold War, a mere fraction of the remaining 16,000 nuclear weapons could destroy our planet.

The proposal made by President Obama in Berlin in 2013 to embark on a new round of disarmament talks offers a chance of concrete progress.

The talks between the E3+3 and Iran are also advancing well. I would even go so far as to say that in ten years of negotiations we never achieved as much progress as we have made this year. The Joint Plan of Action adopted here in Geneva in 2013 is being implemented. Further progress in negotiations would no doubt also give the NPT conference new, urgently needed impetus.

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Yet for the steps that lie ahead of us we need the cooperation of all participants.

We will only be able to move closer towards the final goal of a world without nuclear weapons by working with the nuclear-weapon states.

And this also applies to questions concerning the international order as a whole: Only by joining forces can we move forward along the path towards a new order!

That is precisely why I want to take this opportunity to state that trust and international cooperation have been shaken by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its activities in eastern Ukraine. In view of this we cannot simply return to business as usual.

The Budapest Memorandum gave Ukraine a guarantee of territorial integrity after it had renounced its nuclear weapons. Russia, too, has an obligation to honour that pledge. Security guarantees are a key task of this Conference – and they must be protected!

Given that the future of the international order is at stake, I appeal to my Russian colleague, who spoke here yesterday: The path of multilateralism needs a readiness to shoulder

responsibility and responsible action from all sides – especially from those who, as members of the

UN

Security Council, are particularly accountable.

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The Chemical Weapons Convention is the second example that comes to mind.

The prohibition of an entire category of weapons was a milestone in the history of disarmament.

In the Syria crisis it has proved its worth. Soon the last of 360 tons of mustard gas from Syrian chemical weapons stocks will have been destroyed in Germany. Destruction of the facilities themselves in Syria is also progressing. Syria itself has now acceded to the Convention.

At the same time I condemn in the strongest possible terms the repeated use of chlorine gas as a weapon in Syria. The deployment of weapons of this nature is a monstrous crime! Those responsible must be brought to justice. I support the calls of the

OPCW

Executive Council to this end.

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I would like to mention a third important disarmament tool: the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which recently entered into force.

This, too, shows that even in difficult times we can negotiate complex multilateral treaties which will one day hopefully be universally valid.

Yet at the same time I note with regret that

this and other treaties have to be negotiated outside of the very body that the international community envisaged for this purpose – the Geneva Conference on Disarmament.

In these times of crisis we simply cannot afford a Conference on Disarmament that is hampered and unable to act!

That goes both for traditional disarmament and for the wide range of new threats.

Just consider the most recent cyber attacks.

Think of the use of space – I only need to say the word “anti-satellite weapons”.

And think of the area of new automated weapons systems, which raises difficult legal and ethical questions that we need to discuss within our societies!

Who is going to be capable of tackling these issues, if not this particular Conference or multilateral forums like it?

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Maintaining a balancing act between urgent crises and long-term order – that is the situation in which we work and in which the complex, hard day-to-day graft of multilateralism is more important than ever before.

Perhaps we can find encouragement in the words of Henry Kissinger, who recently warned that if we insist on achieving the end result immediately, we risk crises or setbacks.

Yes, we need to have patience and focus on small steps – driven by the tenacious desire to see progress.

For this Conference it means that no state is prevented from expressing reservations during negotiations. And no state is compelled ultimately to accede to a treaty that has been adopted. But no state should hamper negotiations from the outset!

I am convinced that you, too, ladies and gentlemen, would like to return to the negotiating table sooner rather than later. Let us all work towards that goal!

The world needs a strong Conference on Disarmament.

Thank you very much.

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