



Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

By

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Both as a representative of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, and as a concerned global citizen, I am pleased to join this event commemorating the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.

I wish to thank the Permanent Missions of Indonesia, Kazakhstan and New Zealand for co-sponsoring this event in Geneva, as well as to welcome the contributions by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Mayors for Peace, UNFOLD ZERO, and countless other civil society organizations in pursuing this great cause. I also wish to recognize the co-sponsorship of the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The subject of this International Day is one of the oldest and most durable of all multilateral goals pursued at the United Nations. Let us briefly consider its heritage.

It was a goal identified in the General Assembly's first resolution, adopted in London in January 1946. Even back in 1955, Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld was referring to nuclear disarmament as a "hardy perennial" at the UN. And in 1959, the General Assembly consolidated the goals of eliminating nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction with the limitation and regulation of conventional arms—together, these goals became known as "general and complete disarmament under effective international control". At the General Assembly's first Special Session on disarmament in 1978, this became the world community's "ultimate objective" in this field—an objective now also found in a dozen multilateral treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Yet as we meet today, we are all quite aware of the distance travelled, but also the journey that remains ahead in achieving our final destination. The nuclear arsenals in 2014 are only a fraction of the 75,000 or so at the peak of the Cold War in the mid-1980s. Many nuclear test sites have been closed, and the five nuclear-weapon States reportedly are no longer producing fissile material for use in weapons. Certain categories of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery have been unilaterally reduced or eliminated. Deployments of tactical nuclear weapons have been reduced and many have been destroyed.

While welcome, all these steps fall far short of nuclear disarmament, perhaps best illustrated by what might be called the "planning gap". We continue to see detailed, long-term, and well-funded programmes for the modernization of nuclear arsenals, yet no concrete plans for achieving nuclear disarmament—and of course, no progress on negotiating a nuclear weapons convention. We see the perpetuation of what Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called the "contagious doctrine of nuclear deterrence", which has now spread to some nine countries. Risks of accidents, miscalculations, or willful use of these indiscriminate weapons persist and threaten the world with a humanitarian catastrophe. These weapons are dangerous to the environment, not just in their use but also their testing and manufacturing. They are also a huge waste of scarce financial and technological resources. And 68 years after the General Assembly identified nuclear disarmament as a goal, we continue to hear that negotiations on nuclear disarmament would still be "premature" and must be subject to numerous preconditions. Surely the world community can and must do better than this.

Speaking here in Geneva, I would however caution against holding the UN disarmament machinery—the Disarmament Commission, the General Assembly's First Committee, or the Conference on Disarmament—responsible for the lack of unwillingness or

inability of their Member States to fulfil their disarmament commitments. The stalemates in these arenas are reflections of deeper conditions of international relations, including real differences among priorities of States—addressing those differences is the best way to deal with the problems in that machinery. The “rust” that has been building up in the disarmament machinery is due far more to its non-use or mis-use—or lack of maintenance—than to any structural or design flaw of the machinery itself.

In the field of nuclear disarmament, I can see three changes underway that have a significant potential to be game changers—to revitalize the whole field.

The first is the growing attention worldwide to the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, and their implications under international humanitarian and human rights laws. The greater the awareness of the full consequences of using such weapons, the stronger will be global perceptions of the illegitimacy not just of using them, but even possessing them. This is why international conferences on this issue that have been held in Oslo and in Nayarit are so important—they help to educate the public and to encourage States to attach a higher priority to addressing this issue, a role that will also be played by the next such conference scheduled to take place in Vienna this December.

The second development that has been slowly evolving in the nuclear disarmament field is the growing variety of non-governmental groups taking an interest in this subject. At the Office for Disarmament Affairs, for example, we interact with a whole spectrum of groups well outside the dedicated advocates from the peace and disarmament community. This includes environmentalists, human rights advocates, women’s groups, religious leaders, lawyers, doctors, in addition to a groundswell of interest from international parliamentarians and mayors. When one combines these diverse efforts with the fact that disarmament has remained a subject of great interest to all UN Member States, especially the least powerful, we see a combined trend here: democracy is coming to disarmament.

This is a third great development that, one day, will have some significant potential to open the door to future progress in nuclear disarmament. Let’s call this bridging the “implementation gap”—it refers to the contrast between the international commitments of States to pursue disarmament, versus the lack of any reflection of these commitments in domestic laws, policies, regulations, budgets, and institutions. The lack of disarmament agencies and plans in States that possess nuclear weapons are the most obvious and telling illustrations of this.

Farther down the road, the international community has long recognized that global nuclear disarmament must satisfy certain agreed multilateral standards to be widely perceived as sustainable. It will require verification. It will require enhanced transparency, especially over bombs, warheads, delivery systems, fissile material, and relevant facilities. It must satisfy a standard of irreversibility. It must be universal in membership. And it must be rooted in binding legal obligations. It is difficult to imagine the achievement of nuclear disarmament without satisfying these standards—all are needed, all are worthy to pursue.

Achieving this goal will require positive and constructive participation by States possessing nuclear weapons. It will require active engagement by coalitions of Member States. And it will require persistent and ever-broadening initiatives from civil society.

In summary, I have today discussed what needs to be done, why it must be done, and who should be doing the work of setting the stage for the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons. The Office for Disarmament Affairs will be doing its share by working with Member States, by educating the public, by cooperating with non-governmental groups, and by assisting the Secretary-General in furthering his own personal interest in advancing this great cause of nuclear disarmament.

Here in Geneva in July 1932, French prime minister Édouard Herriot made the following observation at the closing of the first session of the World Disarmament Conference: “There have been times when we may have wondered whether the verb ‘to disarm’ was not in every language an irregular verb, with no first person, and only conjugated in the future tense.”¹

So here in Geneva in September 2014, let us resolve that “to disarm” is best conjugated in the present tense—because without disarmament, there may be no future.

¹ Speech at League of Nations, World Disarmament Conference, Geneva, 22 July 1932.