
Conference on Disarmament

19 March 2009

English

Final record of the one thousand one hundred and thirty-third plenary meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 19 March 2009, at 10.10 a.m.

President: Mr. Idriss Jazaïry (Algeria)

The President (*spoke in French*): I call to order the 1133rd plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament.

Your excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, we currently have on the list of speakers for this morning the representative of Nigeria, Mr. Angbara Awanen, and the representative of the United Kingdom, Ambassador Duncan. If there are any other delegations wishing to speak, I should be grateful if the Chair could be so informed in the course of our deliberations.

(*Spoke in English*)

To start with, I would now therefore give the floor to the distinguished representative of Nigeria, Mr. Angbara Awanen.

Mr. Awanen (Nigeria): Mr. President, since this is the first time the Nigerian delegation is taking the floor during the current session, please accept my congratulations on your assumption of the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament for the 2009 session. Let me also seize the opportunity to assure you and your fellow P-6 colleagues of my delegation's full support and cooperation in the search for common ground in this forum.

My delegation associates itself with the various positions already adopted by the G-21 on a range of issues since the beginning of this session.

The deadlock in the Conference has yet to diminish its importance, as it is the only negotiating forum on arms control and disarmament among big and small countries. Indeed, there is not one country that I know, either in or outside of this forum, which would question the wisdom of the collective approach to questions of international security. That is why it is especially important for Conference members to develop and agree on a consensual approach to the important tasks before this forum.

We have started the year well, agreeing on our agenda, as we have done without much difficulty in previous years. Setting our priorities, as experience has shown, is only the easy part. The real test is to move beyond this yearly ritual and to begin work on the issues we all agree are important. We must now break the cycle of hope, missed opportunities and despair that have characterized our work over the past several years by listening to each other and working together to reach agreement on a programme of work.

My delegation, like many others, attaches priority to getting the Conference to agree quickly on a programme of work that is balanced, fair and takes into consideration the concerns of all members. Given the current difficulties in the Conference, it is obvious that progress, any progress at all, would require members to give as much as they expect to take from others. This kind of accommodation, as we all know, will require a degree of flexibility that comes from strong political will – a will that only our various capitals can provide. We therefore call on all delegations to look at the bigger picture, which is a safer and more secure world. That is a collective responsibility.

Nigeria's support for the P-6 initiative set out in document CD/1840 and before it, CD/2007/L.1, as supplemented by CD/2007/CRP.5 and CD/2007/CRP.6 respectively, reflect our careful assessment that these efforts provide a realistic basis for the Conference to overcome its long-standing difficulties. Two years ago today, when the Minister for Foreign Affairs of my country addressed this forum, she laid out Nigeria's support for a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other explosive devices as a practical measure to achieve the twin goals of disarmament and non-proliferation. Today, the Nigerian delegation looks forward to an early start of negotiations on an FMCT.

Once again, while my delegation wishes to reinstate support for these past efforts, we remain open to new ideas that could get the Conference up and running, as it really should be doing. It has taken the Conference rather too long to move from talk to action. This year should be different, and adopting a programme of work would appear to be the tonic the Conference badly needs to reinvent itself. My delegation is ready to work with others to achieve this goal.

The President: I thank the distinguished representative of Nigeria for his contribution and for his kind words to the Chair. I now give the floor to Ambassador Duncan of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Duncan (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Mr. President, since this is the first time that I have taken the floor in your presence, let me congratulate you on your appointment. I wish you good luck and Godspeed in taking forward our agenda and pledge our support for your endeavours.

I would just like to draw colleagues' attention to a keynote speech given on 17 March, i.e. earlier this week, by the United Kingdom Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Gordon Brown, at a conference on the nuclear fuel cycle held in London. The full text of the speech can be downloaded from the Internet. The easiest way to find it is probably from my blog, and you can find that by going to Google and typing FCOblogs/duncan. It will appear.

If I may, with your indulgence, just draw attention to some of the points raised by Gordon Brown. As I say, it is a long speech and the full text can be downloaded. But the Prime Minister did raise the question that many, including President Obama, share our ultimate ambition of a world free from nuclear weapons, but we must be clear that it will be a difficult path that will be crossed in steps, and not with one single leap.

With each step we must aim to build confidence and confidence that action to prevent proliferation is working and that nuclear-weapon States are making strides to live up to their commitments. The Prime Minister drew attention to the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference next year, and said that he looked forward to working together with other nations.

Under the bargain of the NPT, there is a right for all States to develop civil nuclear power, but there is a responsibility for these States to reject the deployment of nuclear weapons and their development. There is a responsibility, too, on nuclear-weapon States to reduce their nuclear weapons. So, in the coming months, Britain will work with other countries to set out a road plan for the 2010 Conference.

The Prime Minister also went on to say that the fair and even-handed bargain contains two central elements: that we enshrine the right of all nations to acquire civil nuclear power safely, securely and subject to proper multilateral verification processes, with tougher sanctions being brought to bear on those who break the rules, and that nuclear-weapon States must set out much more clearly the responsibilities that we, too, must discharge.

For our part, the United Kingdom will bring forward detailed plans for the future management of our stocks of fissile material and, as part of the road to the 2010 consultations, we will examine how best to deal with the stocks which we have accumulated. We commit the United Kingdom to lead in bringing forward proposals internationally for multilateral control of the nuclear fuel cycle. We will seek to develop innovative partnerships with industry, academia and Governments for further research and development to tackle the technical challenges that we know are involved in developing a proliferation-proof nuclear fuel cycle.

In the meantime, the Prime Minister has drawn attention to the need to drive forward the multilateral agenda, the first steps of which are to commence urgent negotiations without preconditions on a fissile-material cut-off treaty, and for all States to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty. States have national interests, but capping the production of weapon-usable fissile material and outlawing the testing of nuclear weapons are two powerful and achievable goals that we believe are consistent with the long-term needs and interests of every State.

The Prime Minister went on to announce, as main partners will know here, that the United Kingdom has cut the number of its nuclear weapons by 50 per cent since 1997, and we are committed to retaining the minimum force necessary to maintain effective deterrence. For future submarines in our armoury, our latest assessment is that we can meet this requirement with 12, not 16, missile tubes, as on our current submarines.

In Britain, our operationally available warheads now number fewer than 160, and the Government keeps this number under constant review. If it is possible to reduce the number of United Kingdom weapons further, consistent with our national deterrence policy and with the progress of multilateral discussions, Britain will be ready to do so.

So, if we stand together against those who would seek to threaten our security, and in some cases even our existence, we have this week offered a practical plan to deliver on pledges that have been made. We believe it is time for leadership and confidence and common purpose, not for weakness, withdrawal or retreat. We wish to go forward, fully recognizing the importance of the task before us for the sake of future generations across the world, on a common journey towards a world that is free from the fear of its own destruction - a journey of hope in which hard-headed cooperation with friends who were once foes defines our modern age, and let it be underpinned by a covenant of hope that brings us to a truly global society, not of enemies fearful of each other, but of partners with a confidence to work together for peace.

Those are just a few extracts from the speech which I say can be downloaded from the net and read in its entirety.

The President: I thank the distinguished representative of the United Kingdom, Ambassador Duncan, for his presentation and for his kind words to the Chair.

I would welcome any indications by other distinguished members of their intention to make the rest of us partake of their wisdom. I see that nobody is asking for the floor; I still rely very much on their wisdom to guide our steps, as indicated also by the distinguished representative of Nigeria, in order to take advantage of the favourable circumstances that seem to prevail at present and to break the deadlock as soon as we can on the programme of work, so that we can move forward.

I cited the other day a saying by Goethe, who said that "Gott gibt uns nüsse, aber er knäckt sie nicht aus für uns." "God gives us nuts, but He doesn't crack them open for us." So, I think we have an opportunity, for the sake of the credibility of the Conference on Disarmament. It would be good if we could crack this nut open and do so as soon as possible.

I would also suggest that if you have the possibility of giving us the benefit of your wisdom at the forthcoming meeting of the Conference on Disarmament, you might consider letting us know ahead of time. It does not seem that I have any speakers on my list at present, so I now suggest that we close this meeting and that we meet again on 26 March at 10 a.m. in this room.

I see no objection. It is so decided and the meeting is adjourned.

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.