



General Assembly

Official Records

Disarmament Commission

291st meeting

Monday, 13 April 2009, 10 a.m.
New York

Chairman: Mr. Towpik (Poland)

The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

Opening of the session

The Chairman: I declare open the 2009 substantive session of the Disarmament Commission.

The United Nations Disarmament Commission is beginning its new session. The conditions for our deliberations are much more favourable than they have been in the recent past, and I might say that the expectations are also much higher. We are seeing a growing number of disarmament initiatives — in particular in the nuclear field — including the Hoover Initiative, the Evans-Kawaguchi Commission and the Global Zero initiative, to mention just a few. We welcome the recent announcement in London by Presidents Medvedev and Obama that the Russian Federation and the United States are about to start negotiations on reductions in strategic arms. We also welcome the statement that President Obama made in Prague on 5 April.

There is widespread support for the reduction and abolition of nuclear arms among major political leaders in many countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy. Among them, I am pleased to note a strong expression of support from Poland, coming from two former Presidents, Walesa and Kwaśniewski, together with former Prime Minister Mazowiecki. Leading research centres in all corners of the globe are working on reports to provide arguments for urgent political decisions on disarmament measures. All those new developments constitute

important encouragement for our work, and I hope that they will be reflected in it.

The United Nations disarmament machinery does not exist in a political and diplomatic vacuum; this applies in particular to the Disarmament Commission. The Commission was created as a deliberative body with the function of considering and making recommendations on various issues in the field of disarmament. We are expected to stimulate discussion and to seek new ideas and approaches. Our aim should be to help promote and enrich the United Nations debate on disarmament and to eliminate obstacles to effective disarmament deliberations.

We should, however, remember the poor record of the Disarmament Commission in the recent past, and we should do our best to restore credibility to the Commission and political goodwill to our deliberations. We can draw on the Commission's previous achievements, such as the 16 steps on verification, agreed in 1996, or the guidelines for the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones, adopted in 1999. We can also draw inspiration from the 2008 report of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters (see A/63/279) and the recommendations contained in it.

Furthermore, General Assembly resolution 61/67 placed a specific task before us. In accordance with that resolution, we should submit to the Assembly in 2009 elements of a draft declaration of the 2010s as the fourth disarmament decade. I consider that recommendation a crystal-clear priority for the work of

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the Disarmament Commission this year. I trust that the Commission's 2009 session will produce concrete results, and I hope that it will contribute to the revitalization of the overall disarmament process.

On behalf of the Commission, I now have the honour to welcome Ambassador Sergio Duarte, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. It is my pleasure to invite him to address the Commission.

Mr. Duarte: Let me begin by congratulating you, Ambassador Andrzej Towpik, on your election as Chairman of the Disarmament Commission at this session, and also by commending the work of the former Chairman, Ambassador Piet de Klerk. I assure all delegations that the Office for Disarmament Affairs will do all that it can to assist the Commission in the weeks ahead.

One of my goals today will be to attempt to place our deliberations in some historical context, for that context is shaping our work in many ways. It is, of course, no secret that the Commission has encountered its share of difficulties in recent years. It has been unable to adopt new guidelines for a full decade. Some critics, who may not fully understand the Commission's mandate or history, have questioned its usefulness and doubted its contributions to disarmament.

Clearly, the Commission's difficulties in consensus-building have a long history, dating back to its establishment in 1952, following the collapse of earlier United Nations efforts in nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control. In its first special session devoted to disarmament, in 1978, the General Assembly re-established the Commission as a deliberative body with a mandate to consider and make recommendations to the Assembly on disarmament issues. By 1999, the Commission had fulfilled its mandate by adopting, by consensus, 16 texts of principles, guidelines or recommendations, all of which were summarized by the Secretary-General in a note to the General Assembly dating from that same year, contained in document A/51/182/Rev.1. Outside the scope of my prepared text, I must add that I myself worked in the Commission as Chair of one of its subcommissions back in the 1980s, and we did agree on a number of recommendations to be adopted by the Assembly.

However, all this work shows that the Commission has been able to make progress, even at

times of great uncertainty and international tension. The atmosphere today is quite different: the cold war is over, and we have all witnessed a new cascade of disarmament initiatives. We have seen new proposals from the nuclear-weapon States, from former senior statesmen of several countries and from groups in civil society. Japan and Australia have established a new International Commission to focus on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. Last October, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made his own five-point proposal on nuclear disarmament. All of these add to the many nuclear disarmament resolutions adopted each year by the General Assembly.

We have also seen a cascade of initiatives to address challenges posed by conventional armaments, including cluster munitions, the trade in conventional arms, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, explosive remnants of war and landmines. In addition, amid a global financial crisis, public demands are growing for new limits on military spending.

Together, all of these issues constitute the agenda of general and complete disarmament under effective international control, which the General Assembly has designated as our collective ultimate objective. If the Disarmament Commission was able to reach consensus in difficult times, it can surely find the political will to move forward when the political environment is significantly improving.

The Commission continues to perform a useful role in the broader United Nations disarmament machinery. Unlike the General Assembly and the Conference on Disarmament, the Commission provides a forum for focused deliberation on two or three specific items with the goal of achieving a consensus that could strengthen or create disarmament norms. This special ability to focus its deliberations helps to define the Commission's place in the division of labour in the United Nations disarmament machinery. That is the Commission's "value added" within the system.

I therefore wish to commend the many efforts that have already been made, both from this podium and among delegations, to resume the productive work of this Commission. I know the difficulties that lie ahead. We know that the issues are complex and that the process of reaching consensus is never easy. Yet, if these issues were easy to address, they would never have been brought here in the first place. The substantive issues before this Commission are here

precisely because they are difficult, and that makes the process of consensus-building all the more important.

Given the importance of such issues, I hope that the Commission will be able to adopt an agenda for this session and that it will engage in meaningful and productive discussions over the weeks ahead. I wish all delegations well in their efforts to find some common ground and reiterate my own Office's determination to assist delegations' efforts in any way we can. I look forward to working with them for a successful outcome of this session.

The Chairman: I thank the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ambassador Sergio Duarte, for his statement, and I hope that it will provide important encouragement in this process of consensus-building, especially with respect to the agenda.

Adoption of the agenda

The Chairman: The provisional agenda for this session is contained in document A/CN.10/L.62**. However, I understand that we still do not have full consensus on this issue and that we need some additional informal consultations. Thus, my intention is to suspend the meeting for a period of time, in order to allow the informal consultations to continue, and to resume the formal work of the Commission at 12.30 p.m.

At that time, we will resume the formal meeting of this session. Five minutes after the suspension of this meeting, informal consultations will continue in this room. I hope that these consultations will be very useful and will bring a positive result.

The meeting was suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 12.40 p.m.

Organization of work

The Chairman: We shall now proceed with the election of the remaining members of the Bureau. As members will recall, the Commission has still to elect the remaining Vice-Chairpersons, from the Group of African States, the Group of Asian States, the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States and the Group of Western European and other States.

I should like to inform the Commission that the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States has nominated Ms. María del Carmen Castellón Durán of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and Mrs. Liseth Ancidey of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for two posts of Vice-Chairperson of the Commission. If I hear no objection, I shall take it that the Commission wishes to elect Ms. María del Carmen Castellón Durán and Mrs. Liseth Ancidey as Vice-Chairpersons.

It was so decided.

The Chairman: Allow me on behalf of the Commission and the members of the Bureau to warmly congratulate the newly elected members of the Bureau and to wish them success in discharging their duties. I am sure that they will make an important contribution to the smooth work of the Commission. I wish also to mention that I count on their support and counsel.

The next item should be the election of the Chairmen of the Working Groups, but before we agree on an agenda, unfortunately, we cannot take up that item.

Let me finally draw the attention of members to the deadline for inscription on the list of speakers, which is 6 p.m. today.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.