Long-Standing Absence of Consensus in Disarmament Commission Calls Its Credibility Seriously into Question, Say Speakers as Session Continues

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Delegates Support Nuclear-Weapon-Ban Treaty as France, United Kingdom Cite ‘Wrong Strategic Context’ in Opposing Total Disarmament

Negotiations on a legally binding treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons should breathe new life into the work of the Disarmament Commission, speakers said today as that panel concluded the general debate portion of its annual substantive session.

They noted the Commission’s failure to adopt any recommendations to the General Assembly since 1999 and — with an eye on preparations for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons — reiterated the international community’s long-standing objective to eliminate nuclear weapons in a time of growing regional tensions.

Japan’s representative said 17 years of deadlock had called the Commission’s credibility seriously into question, adding that all Member States must work together in seeking ways to reinvigorate it.  Given the rift between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-weapon States, it was imperative to engage in disarmament deliberations with the former, he said, including by enhancing transparency, ensuring the early entry-into-force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, starting negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty, and developing verification measures.

South Africa’s representative described the recent conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons as a bold and positive step, saying there had been significant convergence on key elements, although much work remained.  South Africa supported a prohibition treaty, without prejudice to existing nuclear disarmament commitments, particularly those under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, he said.  It was not acceptable for States parties to treat their commitments and obligations as an à la carte menu from which they could pick and choose, he added.

Afghanistan’s representative said nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists remained a serious concern, declaring:  “The global and regional climate of terrorism and violent extremism has made the call for nuclear disarmament, as well as the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, even more urgent.”

Two nuclear-weapon States explained their absence from the prohibition treaty negotiations, with the United Kingdom’s representative saying her country preferred a step-by-step approach with tangible steps towards a safer and more stable world in which nuclear-armed countries would feel able to relinquish their weapons.  Similarly, her counterpart from France said his country supported total disarmament, but only when the strategic context allowed it.

Egypt’s representative called upon nuclear-weapon States and arms exporters to exert the political will needed to reach consensus, saying universal application of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons would be an indispensable step towards general and comprehensive disarmament.  He joined others in reiterating the urgent need to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

Brazil’s representative said three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons had deepened the collective realization of the grave danger they posed.  Suggesting that the Commission focus its disarmament discussions on transparency, irreversibility and verification, he said there was no reason for the Commission not to reach agreement going forward, since it had been able to do so even during the cold war.

Speakers also emphasized the challenges posed by conventional weapons, including the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, and stressed the importance of implementing the Arms Trade Treaty in full.  Some speakers noted that today was International Mine Awareness Day, reminding the Commission of the danger posed by anti-personnel mines and improvised explosive devices.

Numerous speakers once again expressed their condolences to the Government and people of the Russian Federation for the 3 April Saint Petersburg bomb attack that killed at least 14 people.

Also speaking today were representatives of Senegal, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Iraq, Malaysia, Nepal, United Republic of Tanzania, Morocco, Nigeria, Mexico and Cambodia.

Speaking in exercise of the right of reply were representatives of Argentina, Syria, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, United Kingdom and Japan.

The Commission will reconvene on 21 April to conclude its substantive work.

Statements

KEREN BEBBINGTON (United Kingdom), emphasizing that there were no shortcuts on the road to a world free of nuclear weapons, said her country did not believe that negotiations on a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons would lead to effective progress on global nuclear disarmament.  Rather, it favoured gradual multilateral disarmament, negotiated through a step-by-step approach within existing frameworks.  Such an approach would build trust and confidence, providing tangible steps towards a safer and more stable world in which nuclear-armed countries would feel able to relinquish their weapons, she said.

Strongly condemning the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests, she urged that country to re-engage with the international community while according priority to the well-being of its own people.  She went on to emphasize that her country remained absolutely committed to rigorous implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreed with Iran.  As for the illicit proliferation and use of conventional weapons, she said the United Kingdom accorded priority to the development and implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty, while stressing that greater transparency and confidence-building measures were needed to reduce the risks of unintended escalation of tensions, or military accidents.

TAREK MAHFOUZ (Egypt) said that on the heels of recent negotiations on a nuclear-weapon-ban treaty, the Commission’s efforts must focus on seeking a substantive outcome in order to preserve its credibility.  Calling upon nuclear-weapon States and arms exporters to exert the political will needed to reach consensus, he said the starting point should be implementation of General Assembly resolution 69/58.  A universal Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons would be an indispensable step towards general and comprehensive disarmament, he emphasized, noting that given the urgent need to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East, the present session provided a timely opportunity to get that unfulfilled process back on track and break the current stalemate.  Concerning confidence-building measures in the field of conventional weapons, he called for a number of steps, including the imposition of international inspection on overproduction and the ever-increasing stockpiles in the hands of major arms exporters.

MARTIN ERIC SIPHO NGUNDZE (South Africa) said multilateralism was the best tool for dealing with issues affecting international peace and security, and the Commission provided an inclusive platform for deliberations.  Deeply concerned about the humanitarian consequences of a nuclear detonation, he said only total elimination of nuclear weapons would guarantee freedom from such a threat, describing the recent successful conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons as a bold and positive step.  While there was significant convergence on key elements among participating States, much effort remained to finalize the work during the second session of the conference in June and July.  South Africa supported a prohibition treaty, without prejudice to existing nuclear disarmament commitments, particularly those under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, he emphasized, describing the instrument as a cornerstone of ongoing efforts.  Expressing hope for a fruitful conference to review that Treaty, he emphasized that it was not acceptable for States parties to treat their commitments and obligations as an à la carte menu from which they could pick and choose.  As such, South Africa called upon all States parties to honour their obligations without further delay, including implementation of the 1995 resolution to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

On conventional weapons, he said his country would play its part in efforts to ensure a world free of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions, and called upon States in a position to do so to provide assistance to those in need.  Voicing deep concern about the illicit arms trade, he pledged South Africa’s continuing advocacy of greater United Nations investment in implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.  South Africa would also continue to call upon all Member States to sign and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty, the only legally binding instrument of its kind that promoted transparency and cooperation.

KOSUKE AMIYA (Japan) said the 17-year-long deadlock within the Commission had called its credibility into serious question, and all Member States must work together to find ways to reinvigorate it.  In light of the growing rift between nuclear-weapon States and their non-nuclear-weapon counterparts, engaging with the former in disarmament deliberations — including by enhancing transparency, ensuring the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, starting negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty and developing verification measures — was imperative, he stressed.  As the only country ever to have suffered atomic bombings in wartime, he emphasized, Japan supported the promotion of promoting nuclear disarmament on the basis of an understanding of the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, as well as objective assessment of the reality of the security situation.

He went on to point out that, despite repeated calls, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea continued to conduct tests, including one that had landed within Japan’s exclusive economic zone, which had raised that threat to a new level.  Condemning those actions, he urged Pyongyang to comply with Security Council resolutions and other commitments.  Describing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as the remaining cornerstone of the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, he emphasized the need to maintain and strengthen it.  He also underlined the importance of the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, as well as the Register for Conventional Arms, calling upon all States to provide data and information.  Noting that rapid progress in science and industrial technology posed a great challenge, he said that his country welcomed the establishment of the Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems under the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects.

AMAËL PILVEN (France) said that a serious proliferation crisis had continued since the Commission’s last session.  Non-proliferation standards had been regularly and openly violated in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and Syria, and the danger of biological weapons falling into the hands of non-State actors could not be excluded.  Meanwhile, outer space posed challenges that could not be ignored.  Given that overall situation, there was need to renew dialogue and to beware of polarized debates involving positions and initiatives that divided States and jeopardized established instruments, he emphasized.  With the start of a new review cycle for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it was to be hoped that the instrument would remain the cornerstone of collective security.

He emphasized that his country’s commitment to nuclear disarmament had been seen in its words and actions, including the final dismantling of its nuclear test site and the end of its production of fissile weapons material for military purposes.  France supported total nuclear disarmament, but only when the strategic context allowed it, he stressed, quoting the country’s President.  That context was currently characterized by regional tensions and a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, he noted, while underlining that France would not participate in negotiations on a treaty banning nuclear weapons.  However, it did favour specific disarmament measures within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

ABDOULAYE BARRO (Senegal), associating himself with the African Group and the Non-Aligned Movement, said a collective diplomatic effort was needed to respond to security challenges, emphasizing that the pursuit of purely national interests would only lead to mistrust, defiance and confrontation.  While welcoming the Arms Trade Treaty’s entry into force, he expressed concern about the trade in small arms and light weapons, as well as their transfer, manufacture, possession and circulation, particularly in Africa, calling upon countries that had not yet done so to sign the instrument.  On nuclear weapons, he said the goal of universal adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, complemented by the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, should remain a high priority.  Existing nuclear-weapon-free zones should be reinforced and new ones created, particularly in the Middle East, he said.

CLAUDIO GARRIDO (Chile), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), said all States, regardless of their size or power, had a shared responsibility to help consolidate an international order based on cooperation and regulated by rules.  There was need for greater engagement by democratic international organizations, as well as civil society, in addressing nuclear disarmament, he said, emphasizing the importance of considering practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional weapons.

MAURO VIEIRA (Brazil) said she regretted to note that 71 years after the General Assembly’s first resolution calling for the elimination of atomic bombs and all other weapons of mass destruction, such issues remained unresolved.  Limited reductions thus far had been offset by the continuing modernization and qualitative improvement of nuclear arsenals, he said, while noting that the Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons had deepened the collective realization of the grave danger such weapons posed.  Following the March conference to negotiate a legally binding treaty banning nuclear weapons, the Commission should focus its disarmament discussions on transparency, irreversibility and verification, he urged, noting that, as a signatory to the relevant conventional weapons instruments, his country supported confidence-building measures.  Brazil also supported the Commission’s consideration of a third agenda item — preventing an arms race in outer space.  Going forward, there was no rational justification for the Commission not to reach agreement during the present session, he emphasized, pointing out that the panel had been able to agree even during the cold war.  Greater political will was needed to break the deadlock going forward.

JUAN CAMILO DÍAZ (Colombia), expressing strong support for action against anti-personnel mines, said his country had launched pilot demining projects following the November 2016 Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP).  It was also taking steps to combat trafficking in illicit arms, ammunition and explosives.  As for other categories of weapons, the elimination of cluster munitions was a moral obligation.  Colombia was committed to efforts intended to revitalize the disarmament process and had participated in the recent conference to negotiate a legally binding treaty banning nuclear weapons, he said, emphasizing that actions to eliminate nuclear weapons must be inclusive.  Colombia also supported ongoing efforts to eliminate chemical and biological weapons, he added.

JASSER JIMÉNEZ (Nicaragua) said the Commission must succeed in sending concrete recommendations to the General Assembly.  Welcoming the Assembly’s decision to convene a high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament no later than 2018, he said States must reach agreement on the full and complete elimination of all nuclear weapons, and on a comprehensive and transparent verification system.  Expressing regret over the failure of the 2015 Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation review conference, he said the International Court of Justice ruling that nuclear weapons violated the United Nations Charter was relevant to current discussions.  As for nuclear-weapon-free zones, he described their creation as a step in the right direction, urging forward movement to establish such a zone in the Middle East.  On the trafficking of conventional weapons, he said Nicaragua had adopted initiatives and laws to combat the illicit trade, and welcomed the progress made in efforts to eliminate cluster munitions and other arms.  States must now demonstrate the necessary political will to overcome the current deadlock in the disarmament machinery, he emphasized.

MOHAMED ALI ALHAKIM (Iraq), associating himself with the Arab Group and the Non-Aligned Movement, expressed concern about the possibility of weapons of mass destruction ending up in the hands of terrorist groups.  Emphasizing the need for concerted efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism — the biggest threat to international peace and security — he called for effective security measures to safeguard nuclear facilities and materials.  Turning to the question of a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East, he said that would involve Israel ratifying the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, subjecting its nuclear facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision and getting rid of its nuclear weapons.  He went on to stress the inalienable right of all States parties, especially developing countries, to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, without discrimination and subject to IAEA oversight.

DELFINA JANE DRIS (Malaysia) emphasized that, entering the last phase of its triennial cycle, the Commission must exert leadership, demonstrate political will and exercise flexibility in order to achieve results and thereby retain credibility.  It should build on the momentum of the recent United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, she said, adding that the Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation must continue to guide the vision of general and complete disarmament under international control.  On conventional weapons, she stated her country’s commitment to stringent domestic controls over their trade and circulation, saying Malaysia also supported confidence-building measures at all levels, while believing more could be done to address divergent views in that regard.

DURGA PRASAD BHATTARAI (Nepal), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, emphasized the potential of confidence-building measures to create an environment conducive to complete nuclear disarmament.  Women, youth, civil society, academia and the private sector had an important part to play in spreading awareness and educating the masses to urge their respective Governments to apply disarmament-related confidence-building measures.  Noting his country’s hosting of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and Pacific, he said that such regional mechanisms could also play a greater role in promoting non-proliferation, disarmament and confidence-building measures.  They should be strengthened, well resourced and developed as repositories of best practices in disseminating disarmament-related information, he urged.

MODEST J. MERO (United Republic of Tanzania) said the Commission must achieve concrete results by the end of its three-year cycle.  Expressing concern about the failure of the 2015 conference to review the Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation, he said the United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons was the right approach to achieving that goal.  Expressing support for the IAEA’s role in promoting the safe and secure use of nuclear technology, among other things, he also voiced concern about weapons of mass destruction, calling upon all States to take appropriate steps to prevent terrorists from acquiring arms of any kind.  Turning to outer space concerns, he underlined the importance of strict compliance with relevant disarmament agreements, while describing trafficking in conventional weapons as another threat requiring regulation of such arms.

OMAR HILALE (Morocco) said that the unprecedented first session of the recent conference on a treaty to ban nuclear weapons attested to the widespread conviction that such arms must be eliminated.  He appealed to all countries that supported multilateralism to engage in the process.  The Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation was the cornerstone of nuclear disarmament efforts and zones free of nuclear weapons played an important role, he said, urging the convening of a conference on establishing such a zone in the Middle East.  Deploring the Commission’s current lethargy, he said the body must find new impetus to end the impasse.  Morocco supported a multilateral approach to hastening the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, he said.  On conventional weapons, he said regional and subregional efforts to combat their proliferation and trafficking must be bolstered.

KINGSLEY WEINOH (Nigeria) said the Commission must streamline and improve its working methods if it was to deliver on its mandate.  Describing nuclear bombs as an existential threat to humankind, he emphasized the inexcusable and outrageous cost of maintaining and modernizing arsenals when compared with the resources that States allocated to efforts that could bolster development and further growth.  The Commission’s work had been stymied by a lack of political will and inflexible positions, he noted, expressing hope that Member States would gear themselves towards strengthening the treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation at the forthcoming review conference in 2020.  The International Court of Justice had declared the use of nuclear weapons — or the threat to use them — a crime against humanity, he recalled, while welcoming a successful first session of the United Nations conference to negotiate a treaty to ban nuclear weapons.  Turning to conventional arms, he underlined the need to engage all States affected by the illicit small-arms trade in national and regional efforts to combat the proliferation and trafficking in such weapons.  In that regard, he called for universal adherence to the Arms Trade Treaty.

CLAUDIA YURIRIA GARCÍA (Mexico) said the momentum created by negotiations towards a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons should breathe new life into the Commission’s work.  Describing the condition of the disarmament machinery as unacceptable, she emphasized the organic relationship between disarmament and peace, saying Mexico disagreed with the view that weapons could sustain peace.  She went on to underline the commitment of Latin American countries to nuclear disarmament, noting that the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Latin America and the Caribbean through the Treaty of Tlatelolco had inspired similar zones elsewhere.  Turning to conventional weapons, she called for a comprehensive approach that would address the various instruments and challenges involved.

RY TUY (Cambodia), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement while noting the central role of the United Nations, stressed the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons.  In that regard, negotiations on an instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons leading to their total elimination “should be a value for us”.  It was imperative to strengthen the Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and to ensure the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, he emphasized.  As for chemical weapons, he said Cambodia had established a national authority to strengthen the country’s participation in a global ban on chemical weapons.

OBAID KHAN NOORI (Afghanistan), associating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, said his country was extremely disturbed by the humanitarian threat posed by nuclear weapons and by their possible use.  “The global and regional climate of terrorism and violent extremism has made the call for nuclear disarmament, as well as the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, even more urgent,” he said, underlining that nuclear terrorism remained a serious concern.  On the conventional weapons front, improvised explosive devices had become the priority weapon of non-State actors in many conflicts, he said, noting that such weapons not only damaged political, social and economic development, but also prevented humanitarian assistance from reaching those in need.

Right of Reply

The representative of Argentina, speaking in exercise of the right of reply, replied to comments on the Malvinas\*, the only part of his country’s territory containing landmines.  He recalled that the General Assembly had recognized the existence of a sovereignty dispute between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the Malvinas Islands, South Georgia Islands and South Sandwich Islands and the surrounding maritime areas, and had urged both Governments to resume negotiations to find a peaceful and definite solution as soon as possible.  Despite that and related developments and statements, the United Kingdom continued to reject negotiations, he said, emphasizing that the issue of landmines could only be addressed once an agreement had been reached.

The representative of Syria condemned the use of chemical weapons and all weapons of mass destruction, noting that his country was a signatory to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, and planned to free the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction.  Recalling that Syria’s efforts to address the issue of chemical weapons and the question of Israel had been opposed by several countries, including France, he said that country’s delegate was in no position to make accusations since France had been the first country to provide Israel with a nuclear reactor in the 1950s, and continued to support terrorist groups in Syria.

The representative of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea rejected the remarks by Japan’s delegate, saying his country was bolstering its self-defence measures, while Japan was increasing its military spending exponentially.

The representative of the United Kingdom said her country was clear on the situation mentioned by her counterpart from Argentina:  the future should be determined by the people of the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

The representative of Japan said his country was peaceful and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea should abide by Security Council resolutions.

The representative of Argentina recalled that in 1985, the General Assembly had rejected attempts to recognize self-determination as a way forward.

The representative of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea said Japan had launched a spy-satellite rocket with a view to gathering intelligence on his country’s ballistic missile activities.  Such actions reflected an intention to invade the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, he added.

The representative of the United Kingdom said the United Nations had not said that self-determination was not applicable, stressing that it was essential for the people concerned to be able to exercise their right to choose their future, as in the recent referendum.

The representative of Japan emphasized that his country’s outer space activities were undertaken strictly in compliance with relevant instruments, reiterating that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea must comply with relevant Council resolutions.

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\*     A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).