UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
57TH SESSION

STATEMENT BY

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IN THE GENERAL DEBATE OF
THE FIRST COMMITTEE

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Please check against delivery
Mr Chairman,

1. Please allow me to congratulate you on your election to the Chairmanship of the First Committee. My delegation is confident that under your capable leadership, we will be able to discharge our duties efficiently and effectively. We also extend our appreciation to the previous Chairman, Ambassador Andre Erdos of Hungary, for his work during the 56th session of the General Assembly.

Mr Chairman,

2. The world has moved from one era to another with differing security settings. Dynamism and constant change clearly describes the international security environment. However, developments in disarmament appear not to have kept pace with the security transformations. Looking back at the work of the First Committee since it was formed, it is reasonable to ask whether the First Committee has been like an aeroplane on autopilot in approaching disarmament issues. Did we tend to ignore the repeated warnings from aircraft instruments and air traffic controllers of the dangers ahead, and steer the aeroplane not quite in the right direction? Now that the global security environment has taken another major shift after 911, it is opportune to ask ourselves whether the First Committee should conduct a strategic review of its work and re-examine the course that our aircraft should take?

Mr Chairman,

3. The UN is the key player in disarmament issues, and has been since our organisation's inception. Disarmament is one of the UN's most important responsibilities. Under the Charter, the General Assembly is to "consider the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security, including the principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments". In fact, the General Assembly's very first resolution, adopted on 24 January 1946, identified the elimination of atomic and other weapons of mass destruction as a goal. The General Assembly has had the topic of "General and Complete Disarmament" on its agenda since 1959. And in 1978, following the first Special Session on Disarmament, the First Committee was established.

4. The world and the international security environment have changed in many ways since the First Committee assumed the mantle as the champion of disarmament almost a quarter of a century ago. Yet, in contrast, the First Committee seemed to be somewhat "behind the curve" on the disarmament issues of the day. We appeared to be somewhat unresponsive to the real situation on the ground.

5. During the Cold War, terrified at the prospect of mutually assured

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5 See Arts 11, 26 and 27.
destruction, the main concern of the First Committee was with weapons of mass
destruction (WMD). The international community developed an obsession with
nuclear disarmament – and understandably so. However, this was done at the
expense of addressing the threat and harm posed by other weapons. What is
ironic is that the millions of conflict-related fatalities since the Second World War
till the end of the Cold War had little to do with nuclear weapons. Most of those
who died were the victims of conventional weapons in wars of national liberation
and the proxy wars of the Cold War era. Shouldn't the First Committee have
more vigorously addressed the massive flow of conventional arms that fuel these
wars? Killings by small arms and light weapons (SALW) and other conventional
weapons continued after the Cold War in civil and ethnic conflicts and “resource
wars”. But it was only after an overwhelming groundswell of public sentiment, led
by the NGOs, that the UN took firm steps on several conventional disarmament
issues such as curbing the illicit SALW trade and containing the humanitarian
impact of landmines. Why then didn't the First Committee take the lead on these
issues? As the key player in disarmament, it is the duty of the First Committee to
take the front seat of the aircraft and steer it in the right direction.

Mr Chairman,

6. 911 marked the start of yet another era in the international security
environment, one that brings with it new challenges for the First Committee.
Determining the direction that disarmament should take in this new era is one of
the key challenges that this Committee must face. Our delegation does not
pretend to know the answers, nor are the answers in plain view. To ensure that
the disarmament instrument effectively addresses the security threats posed in
the post-911 period, we urge this Committee to conduct a strategic review of its
work, as it should from time to time when there are significant changes to the
security landscape.

7. Obviously, we cannot continue to discuss disarmament post-911 without
taking into account its association with the menace of terrorism. We now live in a
new world, where all of us are vulnerable to asymmetric terrorist attack on a
scale not previously thought possible. Even the most powerful country in the
world is not immune. We have seen how everyday items can be creatively
morphed into weapons for terror and destruction. What more SALW and other
conventional weapons, and what more WMD if they fall into the hands of
terrorists.

8. The illicit and uncontrolled proliferation of conventional weapons,
particularly SALW, is already contributing to terrorism. With the diversion of illicit
SALW to terrorist networks, acts of terrorism have increased in number and
magnitude around the world. Terrorist groups have used rifles and machine
guns acquired from illicit sources to carry our acts of terror against the innocent.
The UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons had
come up with a comprehensive Programme of Action (POA). Many of the
measures are also targeted at terrorist organisations in a way. But more can be
done to specifically stem the traffic of SALW to terrorists. The First Committee
must take up this responsibility, in parallel with the UN's focus on combating
terrorism.

9. The looming terrorist threat also means that the First Committee should
look at disarmament by nation states in the proper context. Certainly, the UN
must address the economic and social conditions that encourage terrorism. At
the same time, however, the terrorism threat makes it imperative for all countries
to maintain the capacity to defend themselves. States should not give the upper
hand, nor provide breeding grounds to terrorists who have no qualms in attacking
society in the most vicious ways. Vegetius said, "let him who desires peace,
prepare for war." It is the duty of nation states to equip themselves adequately to
protect their citizens against acts of terror. Take for example Afghanistan.
Without a credible and well-armed security force, it cannot behead the multi-
headed Al-Qaeda hydra that has been breeding in its midst. Nor can it prevent
the creature's regeneration.

10. Let me turn to WMD. It is clear that WMD does not make the world a safer
place. Their potential for destruction is too great. Nuclear weapons have been
described, and rightly so, as the Sword of Damocles hanging over mankind. A
mere push of a button, and the human race could be destroyed. Similarly
alarming are chemical and biological weapons - terrifying weapons capable of
wreaking instant and devastating damage. Can we thus imagine the horrors
should WMD be used by terrorists? Indeed, the threat of WMD terrorism is real,
and the danger posed by terrorist acts using WMD is ominous. The key to
combating WMD terrorism is to ensure that no terrorist can get his hands on
nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. This means, for example, greater
focus on curbing the proliferation of WMD and ensuring the proper destruction of
excess WMD, even as nuclear disarmament is pursued. The growing potential of
WMD terrorism certainly deserves a strategic review by this Committee of WMD
disarmament measures.

Mr Chairman,

11. Let me conclude by saying that we are not asking this Committee to
reinvent the wheel. It is evident that many of the First Committee's initiatives are
relevant to this new era where terrorism is of key concern. In fact, the measures
against WMD proliferation and illicit SALW are more relevant now than ever. But
it would be prudent for the First Committee not merely to look into what more
needs to be done to curb the flow of arms and weapons to terrorist groups, but to
engage in a strategic re-think of its work in the post-911 era. Perhaps the First
Committee could hold interactive discussions or roundtables on disarmament
and terrorism during the next (58th) UNGA. It is in our collective interests to take
our aeroplane off the autopilot and steer it responsively to the signals that we
receive in this new era.