STATEMENT BY UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL NOBUYASU ABE BEFORE THE FIRST COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the distinguished members of this Committee -- including many friends and colleagues for many years -- as it commences work on the challenging agenda before us. I wish to extend a personal note of appreciation to the Chairman for his selection to guide the work of this Committee. I also congratulate the members of the bureau and pledge the fullest support of the Department for Disarmament Affairs -- we look forward to assisting your efforts to ensure this will be a productive session.

Many years ago, former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld referred to the General Assembly’s disarmament resolutions as “hardy perennials” in the UN system -- perennial due to their annual reappearance, and hardly because of their proven ability to survive in some difficult environments. While non-binding, these resolutions contribute to a larger process of developing norms to guide the conduct of our Member States. Sometimes they simply identify important goals to pursue. Sometimes they offer standards to use in assessing the actions of States in achieving specific goals. And sometimes they put forward initiatives to bring information to the general public about various dimensions of international peace and security, such as the reporting of data on conventional arms and military expenditures.

It is clearly not the duty of this Committee alone to solve all the world’s international security challenges. It is, however, our solemn responsibility to clarify as best as we can the goals we together seek to pursue, to insist upon concrete practical steps to achieve them, to assess our progress along the way, to identify the need for new norms where they do not now exist, and to ensure that our Committee’s own procedures are adequate to these tasks.

The good attendance today from national delegations and the abiding interest of groups in civil society testify to the importance of the work of this Committee. We would not see such interest if our work had fallen into an empty ritual, a danger we must constantly seek to avoid. I am confident that under the guidance of our distinguished Chairman, we will once again succeed in avoiding that danger.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing this particular session of the Committee is whether we will be able to reconcile two often-competing objectives. On the one hand, we must be realistic -- both in the goals we choose and in the means selected to achieve them. We also have to adapt ourselves to the changing reality of the world. On the other hand, we must recognize that our actions are based on profound commitments to basic principles that are not subject to re-negotiation every year, including most fundamentally the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter. I believe it is indeed possible for this Committee to conduct its deliberations and to adopt its resolutions in a manner that reconciles these most compelling demands. It is not only possible, but essential, for the discovery and implementation of practical steps is the bridge we must cross to achieve our common goals.
As is both customary and appropriate, the Committee will once again consider several resolutions dealing with nuclear weapons, without question the deadliest of all weapons of mass destruction. We should take little comfort in the non-use of such weapons since 1945, for all it would take is one single use to jeopardize the lives of thousands and the entire architecture of international peace and security. Nor should we fall into complacency that the NPT, having been indefinitely extended in 1995, will alone suffice to solve all the problems relating to the achievement of its non-proliferation and disarmament goals. I hope that our deliberations will reflect the fundamental reality that both non-proliferation and disarmament must be pursued together in a mutually-reinforcing manner. The wider our agreement on this basic issue, the greater will be the likelihood of reaching widespread agreement on the relevant nuclear-weapon initiatives before us.

While biological and chemical weapons have been outlawed by multilateral treaties, they too will remain an important subject on our agenda, also because of their potentially massive and indiscriminate effects, especially upon defenseless civilians. The real challenge here is to bring these treaties closer to universality and to secure compliance.

They may not look as horrible as weapons of mass destruction, but conventional weapons -- including small arms and light weapons -- continue each year to kill thousands upon thousands, both military and civilian. The illicit sale or use of such weapons has frustrated the enforcement of arms embargoes mandated by the Security Council -- they have prolonged and aggravated civil conflicts, and they have had terrible secondary and tertiary effects on economic and social development, trade, and even the environment. I am pleased the Committee is taking up such issues and I look forward to the deliberations that lie ahead.

The Department for Disarmament Affairs has assisted many Member States in their work both inside and outside this Committee. We also seek to assist efforts at the regional level, through the work of our three Regional Centers in Latin American and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific. I will be consulting with many delegations in the weeks ahead about the difficult financial challenges facing these centers -- especially the critical situation facing the Regional Center in Lome, Togo -- and I hope that the directors of all three Centers will have the opportunity to address this Committee during its thematic debate.

Though the work ahead for the Committee will be at times difficult, I hope the spirit of multilateral cooperation will provide our most basic inspiration. Please accept my best wishes for a productive session.