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65th session of the UN General Assembly

Before the First Committee:

General debate on all disarmament and international security agenda items

New York, 11 October 2010
Mr. Chairman,

The year 2010 offers some hope in the field of disarmament and arms control, which is to be welcomed, but it may be overshadowed by threats to security and peace, which continue to concern the international community. Policies promoting disarmament and arms control reflect an idea of order which the people of the world desire. For this reason such policies are crucial for everyone’s destiny and they cannot be limited to one strategy alone. A renewed effort is required at national, regional and international levels. It needs to include sound values, fresh logical thinking, and an integral political vision that understands the link between disarmament and the development of peoples.

According to the information furnished by States, world military expenditure in 2009 was USD 1,531 billion, an increase in real terms of 6% and 49% compared to 2008 and 2000, respectively (SIPRI, Yearbook 2010, Oxford 2010). These are astonishing figures, especially in the light of the United Nations Charter, which seeks to ground security and peace not upon a balance of fear but upon the full respect for the rights and the fundamental liberties of individuals and peoples. Furthermore, the UN Charter engages States to promote the establishment and maintenance of “international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources” (art. 26).

The substantial resources, both human and material, committed to military purposes not only distract from but impede the promotion of authentic development, the struggle against poverty and the ending of the present international crisis. As the late Pope Paul VI noted in a speech in Bombay in 1964, “some of the resources destined for military spending could be used to create a World Fund for development programmes, which would be of special benefit to the poorest. This is, unfortunately, a project still waiting to be realized, yet all it requires is States coming together in an expression of their good faith and thus contribute to international peace and security.

With regard to nuclear arms, on the one hand the language of many countries has changed, perhaps indicating a wish to turn the page and go beyond the idea of deterrence as a pillar of international relations; on the other hand it appears to be difficult to achieve real change in policy and actions. The strategic reductions in nuclear arsenals are important steps, but they are insufficient if they are not pursued within the context of a general and effective disarmament conducted in good faith and at the multilateral and international level.

The Holy See has been making every effort and encourages States to intensify their own, with a view to helping enter into force the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and to promoting negotiations for a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, and for a Convention to ban the threat of and the use of nuclear weapons. The International Court of Justice, in its opinion of 1996 on the lawfulness of the threat or use of nuclear arms, affirmed clearly: “The threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law” (ICJ, Advisory Opinion, Reports 1996, p.226, E). This is a fundamental principle in favour of security, peace and the very survival of the human race.

The biological and chemical weapons sectors also remain sources of grave concern. Above all in the biological field, most troubling is the absence of an international monitoring system for the security and safeguarding of laboratories and the guarantee of the peaceful civil use of biological technology that respects the rights of all humans. On account of this the mandate of the UN General Assembly and of the Security Council given to the Secretary-General to investigate possible cases of the use by States of biological technology contrary to international law is to be considered in a positive light. This solution closes a gap in the short term, but alone it is not enough without international monitoring.
Another aspect of great importance in the biological, chemical and nuclear fields is the overlap of the civil and military dimension and of the possible dual use of materials, technology and know-how. A balance must be struck between legitimate military necessity and ethical scientific, medical and commercial interests. It must also be recognized that Multilateral Export Control Regimes are only a partial response. It is important therefore to be aware of the real risks and the need to identify limits and measures not only on a voluntary basis or from a commercial point of view, but also in line with the requirements of international peace and security.

In the field of conventional arms, there appear to be developments worthy of our attention and substantive action. On 1 August last, the new Convention on Cluster Munitions, in which munitions that cause unacceptable damage to civilians are banned, entered into force. This new international instrument, the fruit of the Oslo Process, now offers a rightful response to the numerous victims who have undergone and continue to undergo the tragic effects of this terrible kind of weapon.

For the first time in an instrument on disarmament and arms control, assistance is described as being the right of victims. This convention obliges States Parties to review national policies, structures and mechanisms regarding human rights, development and the care of disabled persons. In light of this significant development, Pope Benedict XVI underlined how the international community has demonstrated a "proof of wisdom, farsightedness and skill in pursuing an important result in the field of disarmament and international humanitarian law" (Post-Angelus, 1 August 2010).

The Holy See encourages the universalization and the effective actualization of the Cluster Munitions Convention as it makes assistance to the victims a priority and common objective. The lack of adhesion to this instrument by some States has led some to consider the possibility of adopting an additional ad hoc protocol to the CCW [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]. If motivated by the intention to reinforce the care of victims, this proposal could be taken into consideration. However, the risk that the introduction of a double standard, which might render achievements on the humanitarian and military level ineffective, must not be underestimated.

A further element of the complex agenda of disarmament and arms control relates to preparatory work to the negotiation of an international Arms Trade Treaty. The Holy See supports and is involved in this important process with the clear knowledge that arms are not in any way equivalent to other "goods" in the market place: "Their possession, production and trade have deep ethical and social implications and they must be regulated by paying due attention to specific principles of the moral and legal order" (Statement by the Holy See Concerning the International Trade in Conventional Weapons, 19 August 2006).

Finally, institutions and agencies which specialize in disarmament and arms control merit special mention. In recent years the Conference on Disarmament appears to have gone through a crisis which made it less productive and practically unable to agree on an agenda of substance. This resulted in a search outside of the Conference on Disarmament and with the involvement of NGOs for alternative solutions leading to the adoption of the Antipersonnel Mines Convention and, more recently, to the Cluster Munitions Convention.

The Holy See looks favourably upon these experiences, insofar as they lead to reflection upon the reform and reinforcement of international institutions and, more generally, of the forums of multilateral diplomacy. The international community is called to find original and practical solutions to desired objectives, among which is complete disarmament.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.