First Committee
4 October 2011

General debate statement

Statement by HE Gary Quinlan
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of Australia to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

Mr Chairman

Congratulations on your election. You can, of course, be assured that Australia’s delegation will work very closely and constructively with you and the Bureau and all member states to achieve results which actually mean something.

In particular, we look forward – with New Zealand – to supporting Mexico in its leadership this year of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) resolution. It is a serious failure that in the fifteenth year since it was opened for signature, the CTBT has not yet entered into force. We join other states parties in calling on those states yet to ratify the CTBT – particularly Annex 2 states - to do so as soon as possible.

Mr Chairman

Australia has a long history of what we hope has been practical leadership in promoting global disarmament and non-proliferation – through bringing the CTBT to the General Assembly, through the model text for the Chemical Weapons Convention, through the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and more recently the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, through our active support for extension and implementation of the NPT, and now for the negotiation of an Arms Trade Treaty. Our approach is a practical one, focused on securing progress – and leveraging it – where we can.
I would like highlight three areas for this session.

First, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Last year, Australia was encouraged by the NPT Review Conference, notably the adoption by states parties of the consensus action plan spanning the NPT’s three pillars of disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and also addressing matters relating to the Middle East. In under seven months’ time, NPT states parties will meet for the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference, where Australia hopes to take a leading role.

The Preparatory Committee meeting should not be a time for complacency – the Action Plan will only be as good as its implementation. But at the same time, Australia believes that the meeting is not the time to reopen last year’s debate. NPT states parties have an action plan, which we have agreed. Our three tasks are implementation, implementation and implementation. We need to recognise the work already done and have a practical and positive focus on what we still have to do.

For its part, Australia - with Japan - has convened the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI), whose members include Canada, Chile, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, countries all committed to a world free of nuclear weapons and all countries with strong non-proliferation credentials.

Among the practical proposals put forward by the NPDI is our proposal for a standard shared with the nuclear weapon states, to encourage increased transparency and accountability in nuclear disarmament. We have taken every opportunity to advocate ratification of the CTBT by those states that have not yet done so. We have encouraged all states to embrace the Additional Protocol as the standard for effective verification of states’ safeguard commitments. We are strongly supporting Canada's efforts to kick start negotiations for an FMCT, through its First Committee resolution.

But, of course, implementing the Action Plan is not the work of just one, or five, or ten states, but all NPT states parties. All of us need to make this a serious priority.

Second is the area of conventional weapons. As we all know, in many countries around the world, armed violence is fuelled by the availability of illicit conventional arms, leading to fractured societies, population displacement, and undermining development programs. As we see all too often, illicit conventional arms also have a particularly harsh impact on women, children and people with disabilities.

To counter the spread of illicit arms, Australia is actively pursuing the achievement of a comprehensive, effective and legally-binding Arms Trade Treaty and has provided practical assistance to states implementing the UN Programme of Action on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. To name just two examples: since 2002, Australia has built seven high security armouries for the Papua New Guinea Defence Force, and under the Australian-led RAMSI mission to Solomon Islands 3600 illicit firearms and 300,000 rounds of ammunition were removed from the community and destroyed under a monitored amnesty.

Australia will also continue to advance humanitarian initiatives on conventional weapons. For example, we take an integrated approach to mine action: we don’t distinguish between our assistance on different types of explosive remnants of war. In this way, we can improve the social and economic well-being of mine-affected communities by
incorporating mine action activities into development programs. We are currently providing over US$100 million to mine action through our Mine Action Strategy.

We will work constructively to support the Convention on Cluster Munitions and to build on extensive preparatory work already done for a protocol on cluster munitions under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons at the Review Conference in November this year.

Mr Chairman

Lastly, there is the Conference on Disarmament (CD). Effective multilateralism is at the heart of Australia’s foreign policy, but the key word here is effective. And Australia is – frankly - embarrassed to have to say that 2011 was again a year of failure for the CD: no program of work, and no commencement of negotiations, particularly on the long overdue treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. Negotiation of an FMCT remain a priority for Australia and we are unapologetic about this commitment. We believe stopping the production of fissile material is a vital means to a vital end: a world free of nuclear weapons.

When he spoke to the CD on 1 March this year, Australian Foreign Minister Rudd warned that if the CD did not get down to the business of negotiating, it would be washed away by history. That risk remains; and it remains imperative that we work to prevent it and to make the CD effective. In 2011, Australia and Japan made a practical gesture to encourage the CD back to work through our FMCT experts side-events. We will continue to do all we can to support an FMCT.

Mr Chairman

There are many other challenges. In particular, we must improve compliance with existing instruments. Australia remains gravely concerned about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea’s nuclear activities, including the revelation of a covert uranium enrichment capability. The DPRK’s pursuit of nuclear weapons poses a significant threat to regional stability and to the non-proliferation efforts of the international community. We also share increasingly serious concerns about the mounting evidence of the possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program. Iran continues to defy binding UN Security Council resolutions and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requirements. We again encourage Iran to comply with Security Council resolutions and engage with the IAEA to resolve all issues, and demonstrate conclusively the peaceful intent of its nuclear program.

Australia looks forward in our thematic statements to setting out our perspectives and ideas on other important international security, including the need for an international dialogue on cyberspace and for rules to guide behaviour in this domain; the need to revitalise discussions on space security, including with a focus on addressing behaviours which contribute to the creation of long-lived space debris; and the need for an outcome at the Seventh Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference in Geneva in December which strengthens this valuable Convention by making it more able to respond to the increasingly rapid advances in life sciences.
Mr Chairman

In concluding, let me say - simply - that we all share simple goals: a world free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and a future for citizens and communities that are safer from the misuse and proliferation of conventional weapons. Achieving these goals is – self-evidently - complex and difficult. But not impossible. We just need to act.

Thank you.