CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Intervention on 24 February at OEWG by Australian Deputy Permanent Representation, Ian McConville:

Mr Chairman, firstly, I would like to thank those delegations that have made some initial comments on the joint paper on a “Progressive Approach” to a world free of nuclear weapons that was presented earlier today by Ambassador John Quinn on behalf of 18 states.

I don’t pretend to speak on behalf of those delegations that were co sponsors of this paper, but I note the following comments from an Australian national perspective.

Firstly, we have heard concern expressed this afternoon that there is too much discussion on “approaches” than “measures”. We are fully in agreement that our principal mandate in Panel 1 is to address concrete legal measures/legal provisions and norms. The progressive approach paper presented today is covering both legal and non-legal measures. For ease of reference, we collectively refer to the ideas as an approach. But we trust this does not prevent us focusing on the substance of the paper, which are the measures contained within.

On the issue of whose security concerns are at stake, the Mexican Ambassador has raised a critical point, and the question deserves a considered response. We believe the answer is simple. Every delegation’s national security concerns are at stake. As we know, states have starkly contrasting security conditions to address.

- There are some parts of the world, and I would number Australia’s immediate neighbourhood, and perhaps the CELAC region, as fortunate to be relatively free of the WMD threat. But this is not true for all states, particularly those located in more volatile parts of the world, and this will naturally inform their ideas of collective and individual security.
- Our paper highlights that security is not a “one size” fits all consideration. It is a very complex/fluid overlay, integral to every country’s national interests and foreign policy outlook. It changes, it gets better, it gets worse. But it is a factor that we all have to address.
- Security considerations should not be seen as an excuse for procrastination on disarmament. Far from it. It should make us work harder to manage the challenges it puts in our path. I should also note that our paper is quite careful not to set the bar too ambitiously on this point. For instance, we note in para 15 that “any regional issues that would hinder nuclear disarmament would need to be addressed”. This sounds like common sense to us. We are not requiring these to be “resolved”; we have asked that they be “addressed”. Part of this, as noted in our paper, will be about strengthening confidence building measures.

On the issue of an inclusive approach, it is hard to argue with the contention that all key stakeholders should be present, including those that possess nuclear weapons, if we are to progress to global zero. Unfortunately, in the OEWG context, a key group of states, those that possess nuclear weapons, are not present. The reasons for this are complex. But, in short, a key explanation would seem to be a sense of mistrust that has developed in recent years within the disarmament community, accentuated by the NPT RevCon and First Committee outcomes in 2015. We don’t think it helpful to cast the blame for why this mistrust has developed; perhaps we should all share
collective responsibility for this. Instead, we urge delegations to look to rebuild that trust, and our paper contains a number of ideas that would help us along this path.

On the question of the inclusion of language referring to “clarifying the logical sequence” (I think that this was in para 14, not 13, of the Progressive Approach paper (WP9)), we don’t see this as excluding the building blocks idea of “parallel and simultaneous effective measures”. We have outlined a number of legal and non-legal measures in our paper, some more directly relevant to nuclear disarmament than others; so more ambitious than others.

- We have continually emphasised that our task is not necessarily to pick out one path that will take us to global zero; we believe this would be self-defeating and destined to deliver poor returns. What we need to do, and this OEWG provides an excellent platform for it, is to work through which of those measures are feasible to progress now, and which will be more necessary, with a longer perspective, to sequence later on. That is the idea behind clarifying the logical sequence.

On the issue outlined in para 14 of the axiomatic requirement that states with nuclear weapons must be involved in the final building block, we maintain strongly the logic of this approach. This final building block, as stated in para 14, would be designed to provide assurance that “nuclear weapons have been destroyed, and that no new weapons were being produced.” We would contend strongly that this would make no sense without the nuclear weapons states or nuclear possessor states as part of these negotiations.

I want to take up the point raised by the Austrian Ambassador, Alexander Kmentt, in presenting Working Paper 5 that “these approaches may be more complementary than is often assumed”. When outlining the “progressive approach” paper, we have said that “building blocks” could be “multilateral, plurilateral, bilateral or unilateral nature, and be mutually enforcing”. Hence, within this conceptualised framework, we visualise a range of measures, including legal and non-legal measures. On this point, Sweden has also said there is much complementarity between a framework and a building blocks approach. It is difficult to argue against this proposition.

So the question is being raised: if we are in favour of “multilateral, plurilateral, bilateral or unilateral” approaches, why wouldn’t we support a Ban Treaty, as one of our “building blocks”. This is an interesting question, but one for which we have a clear response.

- Firstly, as has been demonstrated in our discussions, there is still an evident lack of clarity as to what a Ban Treaty would consist of. We need to hear from its advocates, what they mean by a Ban Treaty. I think the answer would be a mixed one, both in terms of ambition and scope.
- Secondly, assuming we could get agreement on a definition of what a Ban Treaty consists of, we would maintain that the case has not been effectively made in this forum as to why this would be a beneficial step forward. We need to think very carefully about the benefits and the negatives of a Ban Treaty. I raised a number of downsides in my intervention yesterday. But we have heard from other non-alliance delegations today too, including NAM states, on why a Ban Treaty would not be an effective measure.
I would also like to challenge a point raised in the Austrian paper, WP5, which implies only one group of states is working with urgency to promote nuclear disarmament. We would refute this contention. Far from trying to perpetuate a nuclear weapons based security system, those states that are supporting the “Progressive Approach” paper have put forward a range of ideas that offer a range of possibilities for direct, effective action, without any procrastination and delay.

Finally, two delegations have identified in their interventions the view that the Progressive Approach paper is focused on “non proliferation” measures, and not on “disarmament”. We respectfully disagree with this viewpoint. As an example, we believe a Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty (FMCT) and CTBT could serve both functions. We would also highlight specific references in paras 14-16 which canvasses options for not only getting to the minimisation point (which by definition would involve disarmament) but also for measures to adopt when all nuclear weapons have been destroyed.

I thank you Mr Chairman.