Panel II

The New Zealand Delegation would like to focus primarily on the first two of the ‘guiding questions’ which you have set, Mr Chair, for this second panel discussion. These relate to the challenges nuclear weapons present for global governance, and the risks which are associated with these weapons.

Both issues, I think, must have been in the mind of UN Secretary-General Ban when, on the occasion of a recent International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, he said: “Nuclear disarmament is ... not an idealistic dream, but an urgent necessity to meet the genuine security interest of all humanity”.

Risk
Much of the urgency for nuclear disarmament undoubtedly stems from the level of the risk we all face from these weapons. Our region of the Pacific is only too well aware of the harmful long-term effects of nuclear weapon testing (although over the many decades that this was carried out in the Pacific we were always told that it was risk-free). Having seen the environmental and health effects of testing, then, it is not hard for us to understand the horrendous consequences of an actual nuclear weapon detonation – whether this were to occur by accident or design.

Recently, we have all learnt from the Humanitarian Conferences a lot more about the extent and gravity of the risk that nuclear weapons present for our global environment and our economies - and we have learnt a lot more, too, about the number of ‘near-misses’ that have occurred over the years. Both are greater than we had previously thought and serve to accentuate the reality of the threat we face.

We hear it often said that we non-nuclear weapons States must be practical and realistic in our quest for nuclear disarmament - and we
are urged to adopt a concrete, step-by-step, approach to nuclear disarmament. New Zealand sees itself as having done exactly this for a considerable time now. We would instance in particular our efforts at the 2005 and 2010 NPT Review Conferences, in concert with Australia, to promote greater transparency on the part of the Nuclear Weapon States; as well as our efforts, via the De-alerting Group of countries, to encourage the nuclear powers to lower the readiness status of their nuclear weapons. We have had little success in either context.

Specifically with regard to the efforts of the De-alerting Group, I note that an overwhelming number of UN members see a reduction in the operational readiness status of nuclear weapons as being exactly the sort of practical, realistic step we should be able to expect the Nuclear Weapon States to take. An increased lead-time for any launch of nuclear weapons does at least reduce the risk of accidental or miscalculated launch – yet we have not been able to persuade the states who are key on this issue, the United States and Russia, to lower the risks of a detonation by moving forward with this very practical measure.

The problem remains that whatever label you might choose to give the step-by-step approach it has yet to prove its value as a route to a nuclear disarmament.

**Governance**

At the High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on nuclear disarmament in 2013, NZ’s Prime Minister acknowledged the need to look beyond near-term, or interim, steps – such as lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapons – and focus also on the development of legal frameworks for abolishing nuclear weapons.

We see this new legal framework, or governance structure, as being nothing more than what States Parties were promised in Article VI of
the NPT – a promise that the Treaty’s membership would not just sit with the status quo reflected in the NPT but would move forward, on the basis of multilateral negotiations, to frame a new undertaking – that for a nuclear weapon-free world.

Some of the discussion at this OEWG might seem to suggest that there are some who are content – or at least content *enough* – with the status quo and who are therefore determined that we must not look past the *current* legal context to explore any new undertaking – or at least not until after some far-distant end-point has been reached. This, Mr Chair, would be a waste of the opportunity that UNGA Resolution 70/33 has given us to identify common ground in moving forward on the best approach for new legally-binding nuclear disarmament measures.

I have heard an assertion here in the OEWG that we must not examine legally-binding nuclear disarmament measures because that would negatively affect the existing architecture, viz the NPT. This is an argument we have heard previously and which has been discounted, as a matter of international law, in a paper presented by NZ at last year’s First Committee (and as already referenced in NZ’s statement earlier this week).

In our view and that, I know, of many others here, the adoption of legally-effective measures to prohibit nuclear weapons would enshrine IHL and humanitarian values which we hold dear. It would bolster the effectiveness of the NPT and assist in restoring the full credibility of its ‘grand bargain’. It would be consistent, in the words of the UNSG, with our genuine security interests.