

Fifty-eighth session
First Committee

Monday, 6 October 2003
10:00 a.m.
Conference Room 4

BRIEF FOR THE CHAIRMAN

The second meeting of the Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee) is called to order.

Distinguished delegates,

This morning the First Committee, in accordance with its programme of work and timetable, will begin its general debate on all disarmament and related international security agenda items.

Before I call upon the first speaker, allow me to make a brief statement in my capacity as the presiding officer of this body.

[Chairman's Political Statement]

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation for the honour of serving as your Chairman. While I can count upon the capable assistance of the Bureau to lighten my burdens over the weeks ahead, I know that I will benefit from the cooperation and help of all my colleagues on this Committee. In this respect, I would like to recall an old Finnish proverb: Advice is good; help is better.

The Committee is meeting this year in troubled and troubling times. Too many countries are struggling to overcome chronic armed conflicts within their own borders. Sadly, many countries continue to divert, to military uses, scarce resources that could otherwise meet basic human needs. Some continue to view deadly conventional weaponry as just another commercial commodity. Some are even alleged to be helping others to acquire weapons of mass destruction, while others may be seeking to acquire such weapons, or are failing to eliminate their own stockpiles. And some are developing new weapons that are not yet covered by any treaty regime or that fall into the gaps of existing legal constraints -- this applies to missiles and space or anti-satellite weapons, for example.

Together, these and related developments cast a shadow over our deliberations. Moreover, they have both contributed to and been exacerbated by a crisis of confidence in multilateralism and the rule of law in international relations.

Consequently, the realization of our hopes for a safer world based on collective security is ever more elusive. On the ascendancy is the belief that it is every man for himself and that the only effective means of national defence and maintenance of international peace and security is through unilateral action. And despite the growing lethality of modern weapons systems -- or perhaps because of it -- one increasingly encounters commentators calling for military solutions to intractable political problems. These are astonishing and deeply disturbing developments, given the consequences of the total wars of the last century. Again and again, we have seen hope yield to fear, a syndrome inevitably aggravated -- but not caused -- by the tragic events of 9/11.

Just as no single crisis can fully account for our current predicament, no single remedy offers any quick or easy solution. We are facing instead a challenge that will require many tools, in many a patient hand. We must neither turn a blind eye to the very real shortcomings in some existing multilateral approaches to international peace and security, nor -- be it out of frustration or out of design -- cast aside long-standing multilateral norms and security frameworks simply because a tiny minority of States has chosen to flout them. We must not lose sight of the fact that an overwhelming majority of States continue to fully live up to their multilateral commitments. We should not seek to "reinvent the wheel," so to speak, by improvising ad hoc responses to persisting threats, when many of the potentially most productive ways of confronting those threats rest in the constructive implementation and growth of existing multilateral treaty regimes -- particularly with respect to weapons of mass destruction.

However, as the Secretary-General mentioned in his address to the General Assembly on 23 September, "it is not enough to denounce unilateralism, unless we also face up squarely to the concerns that make some States feel uniquely vulnerable, since it is those concerns that drive them to take unilateral action. We must show that those concerns can, and will, be addressed effectively through collective action." This suggests that we will have to pay closer attention to the problem of non-compliance with existing multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation commitments. It means that time is fast running out on addressing some long-postponed challenges, including the challenge of enforcing norms after non-compliance has occurred. It means the development or wider acceptance of transparency and accountability measures, to build confidence that reassuring words are in fact finding expression in security-enhancing deeds. It means a deepening recognition among all delegations of the important role played by civil society in providing a solid foundation of political support for national commitments to observe multilateral norms, a foundation that can only grow in strength with improvements in education. It means the need for additional efforts to promote universal membership in multilateral treaty regimes, along with the further consolidation of regional arrangements, including nuclear-weapon-free

zones. It also means the importance of deliberating initiatives to forge new norms to deal with evolving challenges in such fields as conventional arms, small arms and light weapons, space weapons, missiles, and WMD terrorism -- to name only a few requiring urgent attention.

Distinguished colleagues, the deeper our common understanding of multilateralism as an indispensable basis for constructive, long-term solutions to global security problems, the better prepared we will be not just to cope with such problems, but actually to solve them. We must never forget the inseparable relationships that exist among many of the issues on our agenda. As the Secretary-General stated in his recent report on the work of the Organization in addressing the deadly threats from weapons of mass destruction, "Concerted efforts to promote disarmament, non-proliferation and the security of weapon-related materials are essential for preventing terrorists from obtaining such weapons."

We should, in this light, view the many items on our agenda not as isolated, compartmentalized issues, but as security concerns that are closely connected -- progress on disarmament, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation can be mutually reinforcing, while opening up new possibilities for progress in development. In considering these relationships, and recalling the Secretary-General's proposals for reforming the work of the organization, we may wish in our deliberations to take a closer look at our own procedures, to ensure that we are best organized to undertake our work efficiently and effectively.

As I said a week ago at our organizational meeting, effective multilateralism is possible only if the multilateral mechanisms provide a credible alternative to unilateral -- or plurilateral -- solutions. As a representative of a small country committed to the United Nations and to multilateralism, I see their strengthening as essential to our work during this and subsequent sessions. My country's history shows only too painfully what the collapse of collective security can entail.

It is true that without political will on the part of the Member States, it will be difficult to strengthen multilateral institutions. At the same time, that political will may be difficult to generate and nurture if the institutions themselves are seen as beyond hope of revitalization. We have, indeed, come to a fork in the road also in terms of making our, the General Assembly's, work more meaningful and more relevant. You may recall the conundrum about whether if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there, does it make a sound. I think we should ask ourselves whether if a statement is made, however valuable, in the General Assembly, and no one in the outside listens or cares, does the statement make a sound. If the answer is negative, we all together - big and small alike - have a problem.

[Transition here to organizational/procedural issues.]

It is my pleasure now to give the floor to Mr. Nobuyasu Abe, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, to make a statement.

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I thank the Under-Secretary for Disarmament Affairs for his statement, which I am sure, will contribute greatly to the deliberations of this Committee.

Distinguished delegates,

The First Committee will now commence its general debate on all disarmament and international security agenda items. Before starting, may I take this opportunity to remind delegations to kindly limit their statements to 10 minutes for those speaking in their national capacity, and 15 minutes for those speaking on behalf of several delegations or regional groups.

The first speaker on the list of speakers is the distinguished representative of Mexico, Ambassador to whom I now give the floor. You have the floor Sir.

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I thank the distinguished representative of Mexico for his statement {and for his kind words addressed to the Chair and to other officers of the Committee}.

I now give the floor to the distinguished representative of -----

[Please follow the list of speakers]

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I thank the distinguished representative of ----- for his statement {and for his kind words addressed to me and to other officers of the Committee}.

That completes the list of speakers for this morning.

Before adjourning the meeting, let me remind delegations that the deadline for the closure of the list of speakers for the general debate on all disarmament and related international security agenda items is today at 6:00 pm.

The next meeting of the First Committee will be held tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m. sharp in Conference Room 4.

The meeting is adjourned.