



HOLY SEE

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STATEMENT BY
H.E. ARCHBISHOP CELESTINO MIGLIORE
PERMANENT OBSERVER OF THE HOLY SEE TO THE U.N.
AT THE GENERAL DEBATE OF THE FIRST COMMITTEE
ON AGENDA ITEM 74:
GENERAL AND COMPLETE DISARMAMENT

Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of my delegation, I wish to join the previous Speakers in expressing our congratulations on your election and to assure you of our complete cooperation as you guide the Committee's work this year. I take this occasion also to convey the Holy See's continuing appreciation for the work for peace done year after year in this United Nations setting.

If it seems impossible to have nations lay down their arms in the present set of international relationships, perhaps the reason is because we have not done sufficient preparation to give States and their leaders the assurance that security can be obtained without the never ending development and production of arms. This means that the conditions for peace must be built first before we can enjoy the fruits of peace. The soil must be nourished before the blossom appears.

That is why the work done by the United Nations and its agencies in building a culture of peace is so important. If we are to aspire to general and complete disarmament, we must first of all show a respect for life and the dignity and human rights of individuals, reject violence, promote freedom, justice, solidarity, tolerance and the acceptance of differences, and develop better understanding and harmony between ethnic, religious, cultural and social groups. This agenda is indeed vast, but if the world community does not embrace it, we will continue to suffer the ravages of war.

The main purpose of the United Nations to maintain international peace and security can be realized in many different ways, for it is a purpose threatened and challenged on many fronts. In his address at the opening of this session of the General Assembly, Secretary-General Kofi Annan spoke of the "hard" and "soft" threats to peace faced by the UN. Among the hard threats are terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, while the soft threats include the persistence of extreme poverty, the disparity of income between and within societies, the spread of infectious diseases, and environmental degradation. Both types of threats are real and must be recognized by all States.

Moreover, the Secretary-General emphasized that the UN does not have to choose to confront one to the exclusion of the other; indeed the UN cannot do so. This need and concern for a comprehensive view of international peace and security are fully shared by the Holy See, as evidenced primarily by its teachings on the nature of the human person, human dignity and a just social order. It is from this starting-point that my Delegation has always addressed this Committee.

Mr. Chairman,

The specific focus of the First Committee is on disarmament matters, usually considered hard threats to be handled by a number of multilateral initiatives and agreements. The importance of dialogue, negotiation, diplomacy and reference to the rule of law in these proceedings cannot be over-estimated. Though we have mediation and verification techniques embodied in international law, they are not being sufficiently utilized, and thus nations lapse into war. The steady application of the rule of law must be supported as the means to peace rather than constant recourse to militarism. In this regard, this Committee has a prominent role to play in insisting on standards to curb the excesses of weaponry. Such work is a direct contribution to build the conditions of peace.

Small arms ought to occupy our immediate attention, for small arms and light weapons kill more than half a million people each year – including 300,000 in armed conflict and 200,000 from homicides and suicides, of which 90 percent are civilians. Throughout the 1990s, small arms were used in 47 of 49 major conflicts. To fully address the small arms problem, there must be greater recognition that domestic laws and international policies are interdependent, and that the legal and illegal markets for small arms are inter-related. Many illicit transfers start out as legal ones. In this regard, my Delegation re-iterates its view that attention should be focussed on two important issues: State responsibility for illicit transfers and a legally binding agreement on the international arms trade.

The proliferation of small arms augment armed conflicts and diminishes the opportunities for human development. People in developing countries are more than twice as likely to die from small arms than their counterparts in the developed countries. Small arms impede the tasks of aid workers and relief agencies. The prevalence of such weapons discourages teachers and children from going to school and farmers from taking their goods to market. The reconstruction of war-torn societies is made all the more difficult when such weapons are widely available. Governments should see this fact as not just a problem of national security but of human development. A human rights approach to small arms puts people at the centre of the analysis and highlights that it is up to governments to take action.

Mr. Chairman,

The vast majority of Cold-War arms control thinking relied on the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Everyone knows that this deterrence concept was based on a terrifying foundation: that one bloc's security can be defended by threatening the annihilation of the other bloc's population. The horrible prospect of global nuclear warfare was thought to be enough to ensure some form of peace and security, while over time both bilateral and multilateral agreements sought to reduce this possibility by encouraging and verifying the reduction of nuclear weapons in the world. This was made concrete in one particular case by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The end of the Cold War should have seen the end of MAD policies that held the world in fear, but events over the past year have led to a certain resurgence in this thinking. With it have come a real weakening of the NPT regime and multilateral efforts for disarmament and non-proliferation. By exploiting certain loopholes in the NPT and engaging in covert proliferation activities, some States are once again banking their security on the possession and threatened use of

nuclear weapons. These steps should be alarming to everyone. As my Delegation has insisted on many previous occasions, nuclear weapons are incompatible with peace in the 21st century.

As governments prepare for the 2005 Review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the question of proliferation of nuclear weapons in all its aspects must be addressed. In the new age of terrorism the world has sadly entered, in which the fear of a terrorist attack with nuclear devices is present, the world community must give life to the following words, contained in the Final Document of the NPT 2000 Review, which all NPT States Parties agreed to: “[...] the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.”

The other weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons, also present serious problems. Like the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, many chemical and biological agents are used for legitimate and even beneficial purposes, but some of these can be easily converted into weapons-grade material only to be bought, sold and transported without detection. Multilateral inspection agencies, such as the IAEA for nuclear materials and the OPCW for chemicals, are vital to ensuring compliance and verification, and the lack of such an agency for the Biological Weapons Convention needs to be remedied quickly. Stringent export controls on the part of States who produce these materials would help stem illicit transfers and hold States more accountable for licit ones.

It is an unfortunate fact that many arms control treaties contain loopholes and weak points in terms of compliance, verification and enforcement. None of these weaknesses should, however, divert our attention away from the seriousness of the threats posed by these weapons. Stronger enforcement measures, perhaps by developing interdiction agreements and policies among States, may be one way of making sure that international law is upheld and vindicated. Making transparent, verifiable and irreversible reductions in offensive weapons is the most direct approach to disarmament. However, at the same time multilateral security assurances in line with changing geopolitical realities among States and, perhaps most importantly, internal political reforms have been shown to eliminate the need for such weapons in the first place. These assurances and reforms have certainly been effective in encouraging the nuclear disarmament already undertaken by a number of States under the NPT regime.

Mr. Chairman,

All the steps that must be taken in the disarmament process may seem at times overwhelming. But if they are seen in the context of building a culture of peace, they are not perhaps so daunting, with a view to combat both the hard and soft threats to our collective peace and security and guarantee the survival of humanity. What is essential to fulfill the peace agenda is to change the attitude of both States and individuals. We must realize that violence is not the inevitable lot of mankind. We have already constructed the broad framework of international law and have, in the United Nations, the political instrument to implement that law. The knowledge of these gains already achieved by humanity should fill us with hope that recourse to violence and war can be overcome by renewing a political commitment to a multilateralism which is based upon the values of responsibility, solidarity and dialogue. The steady application of disarmament steps can indeed light the way forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.