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**Statement before the First Committee
of the
General Assembly**

by

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to address the distinguished members of this Committee upon the opening of its 2006 session. We begin on a positive note indeed, for today our Chairperson has become the first woman to preside over this Committee in its sixty-one-year history. I offer you, Ambassador Juul, my sincere congratulations on your selection to assume this heavy responsibility. I also wish to congratulate the members of the Bureau for their appointment and to pledge the fullest cooperation and support of the Department for Disarmament Affairs to make this a productive session.

Over the last two weeks, speaker after speaker in the plenary of the General Assembly offered a gloomy prognosis for international peace and security, while almost half of the statements hardly addressed the issue of disarmament at all. This was less than satisfactory but certainly reflects the current environment facing disarmament issues. I urge the delegates to work harder in their own governments to raise the priority of disarmament and non-proliferation. But for those who spoke on the subject, the grounds for their concerns are familiar to us all, and relate to various setbacks in the past year, including:

- the lack of significant progress on disarmament;
- the silence of the World Summit's Outcome Document on weapons of mass destruction;
- the disappointing climaxes to the 2005 NPT Review Conference and the review conference on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons (SALW);
- failures to comply with non-proliferation commitments;
- growing terrorist threats;
- rising military expenditures;
- new resorts to the threat or use of force;
- new dangers in the Middle East and the Korean peninsula;
- and the persistence of unilateral approaches to security.

Yet we must not let such events blind us to the achievements made in the same period. Last year the General Assembly adopted a major convention on the suppression of nuclear terrorism. This summer, it also adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which offered a Plan of Action for what the UN system should do in the years to come. It invited the Secretary-General to establish a comprehensive database on biological incidents and noted the importance of his proposal to establish within the United Nations a common programme of biotechnology stakeholders to reduce terrorist threats and promote the public good. More states have joined key multilateral disarmament and arms control treaties, and more have signed and/or ratified the IAEA's Additional Protocol.

Over 19% of the world's declared stockpile of approximately 70,000 metric tonnes of chemical agent have been verifiably destroyed and almost 30% of the 8.6 million chemical munitions and containers covered by the Chemical Weapons Convention have now been verifiably destroyed. The fact that we could report the achievements in concrete figures is the direct result of the verification mechanism in the Treaty.

The Conference on Disarmament has concluded its 2006 session, which was characterized by a productive structured debate on key issues before it, with signs of possible positive developments. I therefore regret that the CD could only adopt a report to the 61st Session of the General Assembly that was merely procedural as it failed to reflect more

fulsomely the events of this year. I urge CD members to make every effort to build on the developments of the last session with a view to commencing early substantive work during 2007 session.

I wish to also underscore the important role of the UN Disarmament Commission in building a common and shared understanding of the most immediate threats. I believe that the recommendations adopted by the UNDC on improving its work methods will help it to address its challenges more effectively.

It is important -- in all bodies of our disarmament machinery -- to remind the world not only of the dangers that threaten us, but also that we are not powerless in face of them -- that practical, positive steps are within our reach. We should be awakened from sleepwalking. We should build upon these positive steps one by one, small as they may be, in spite of the uphill battle of our path toward disarmament. This is why we have to be practical and realistic and should demonstrate the spirit of compromise at times.

It is not enough for us simply to anguish over the future or to make accusations over who is to blame for the world's persisting threats. Frankly, this will get us nowhere. The First Committee must be more than a forum for reciting policy statements. We must instead work together to build bridges over the divisions that remain.

In recent years, this Committee introduced changes in how it conducts its deliberations. Last year's thematic debate marked an important step forward in improving our methods of work. The Committee must also make a sincere effort to reduce the number of resolutions, while ensuring that they are more concise and action-oriented, with improved follow-up measures. Adopting certain resolutions biennially or triennially would help, as would the consolidation of others that address common themes.

The Committee will hear from the presiding officials at each of the institutions that comprise the UN disarmament machinery -- as well as the Director-General of the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons); the Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the CTBTO; and the President of the SALW review conference, as well as the Presidents-designate of the forthcoming review conferences of the BWC (Biological Weapons Convention) and the CCW (Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons). The Chairmen of the Groups of Governmental Experts on both the UN Register of Conventional Arms and verification issues will address the Committee on the results of their work. And building on last year's precedent, members of non-governmental organizations will address the Committee, as will Hans Blix, the Chairman of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.

The issue of nuclear weapons has been a focus of United Nations deliberations ever since its inception. Despite some post-Cold War reductions, tens of thousands of such weapons still exist, and we also have new or emerging threats from such weapons in the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia, while several states are developing long-range

missiles to deliver such weapons. The old problem of “vertical proliferation” – the improvement of existing nuclear arsenals – is now no longer confined to the five NPT nuclear-weapon states, while dangers of geographical or “horizontal proliferation” persists. Our anxiety about the future of the NPT regime is further fuelled by the impasse on the Korean Peninsula and by concerns about Iran’s nuclear intentions.

I am certain that the world would welcome a further commitment by the Russian Federation and the United States – who have by far the largest nuclear stockpiles – to reduce substantially their holdings of both strategic and non-strategic weapons, under a new treaty to follow the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. The world would also welcome greater transparency with respect to both the number of weapons and amount of fissile material held by all states that possess such weapons, as well as clarification of their specific plans to achieve their disarmament commitments.

I hope the Committee will also voice its strong support for the negotiation and timely conclusion of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, while underscoring the urgent need for progress on other issues such as the weaponization of outer space, negative security assurances, and nuclear disarmament within the framework of the Conference on Disarmament.

Our common task with respect to biological and chemical weapons is to bring their respective treaties closer to universal membership, promote national implementation measures, and secure compliance.

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) experience is instructive. The OPCW has successfully run an Action Plan on national implementing legislation and a Universality Action Plan since 2003. While the Biological Weapons Convention lacks a comparable structure of permanent institutions, BWC States Parties have endeavoured to comply with their BWC obligations and to build further confidence. I therefore hope that the forthcoming BWC Review Conference will contribute to enhancing transparency through strengthened confidence-building measures.

Weapons of mass destruction understandably are a concern of all states. So too are the dangers posed by a wide range of conventional arms, including small arms and light weapons, landmines, submunitions, artillery rockets, and other such weaponry that have been debated or placed on the UN agenda throughout the history of this organization. Actual casualties suffered by these weapons, particularly in conflict-ridden regions such as Africa and Middle East, have been devastating. These weapons are difficult to control since many have legitimate defence uses. There are also powerful economic interests that promote the continued production and export of such weaponry, and there is as yet no binding multilateral treaty – apart from the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons – to control such commerce, though this gap between the ground reality and the rule of law may change in the years ahead if the proposal for an Arms Trade Treaty moves forward.

The agreement last year on an instrument for the marking and tracing of illicit small arms and light weapons marked a significant political step forward in this contentious area. The disappointing outcome of this year’s review conference on the implementation of the Programme of Action on the illicit trade in SALW must not frustrate future progress in this

field. Despite its failure to reach agreement on a final document, the Conference was successful in placing the issue of small arms on the front burner of disarmament issues. States across the board reaffirmed their full commitment to the principles, objectives and measures of the Programme of Action that does already include the convening of biennial meetings to consider its national, regional and global implementation. It is up to this Committee to decide how to implement the Plan of Action in the following year.

But the next step is to tackle the issue of illicit brokering. The Group of Governmental Experts which was established by the General Assembly will commence its work in November 2006, to consider steps to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit brokering in small arms and light weapons.

With respect to the UN Register of Conventional Arms, it is gratifying to note that the Group of Governmental Experts has made some solid and encouraging progress in enlarging the coverage of the reporting geographically as well as in agreeing on an optional form for reporting data on small arms and light weapons.

I am also very pleased to report that the United Nations standardized instrument for reporting military expenditures -- maintained and promoted by the Department for Disarmament Affairs -- is approaching a new milestone. We are hoping that by the end of the year a record number of states will have used this instrument, an achievement that will be all the more significant as global military spending continues to rise.

Next month, at its forthcoming review conference, parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons will mark the entry into force of Protocol V dealing with explosive remnants of war. The final success of this vital endeavour is now in States Parties' hands -- in the ability to achieve further progress in the implementation of the convention and ensuring its compliance.

I cannot today address in detail all the other items that are on our agenda, but I can assure all members that the Department for Disarmament Affairs will continue to assist member states in their work, as best as its limited resources will allow.

No opening statement to the First Committee would be complete without a tribute to the hard work of the many dedicated individuals and groups from civil society on behalf of disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation. Though they are under-funded, let us reassure them that their efforts are not under-appreciated -- for they have accomplished much in performing research, advocating constructive changes in public policy, educating the public, and training future generations in disarmament and non-proliferation. I would like to thank the NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security -- including its President Ann Lakhdhir and Bhaskar Menon, the editor of Disarmament Times -- Reaching Critical Will, and all of their colleagues in civil society who have worked for many years on behalf of virtually all the issues before this Committee.

In closing, please accept my best wishes for an informative and productive session.