

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT
STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA
24 JUNE 2008

Thank you, Madam President,

At the outset, please allow me to add my delegation's congratulations on your assumption of the Presidency of the Conference on Disarmament and to express our appreciation for the efforts undertaken by the 2008 CD Presidents thus far to steer our discussions in this forum with a view to moving forward on a Programme of Work.

Since the tabling of document CD/1840 during March of this year, my delegation has closely followed the interventions of numerous delegations that have spoken about the CD's continued inability to agree on a Programme of Work. Many delegations have also lamented the stalemate or impasse that has existed in the Conference over the past number of years.

However, Madam President, if one looks at the Conference on Disarmament, one cannot claim that the structure of the Conference does not allow negotiations to take place. Indeed, if this were the case, then it would not have been possible for the CD to have negotiated any treaty to date. One cannot argue that if the CD's Secretariat had more staff, then negotiations will commence. One cannot say that a lack of funding prevents the CD from negotiating. Neither can one make the case that the Conference's agenda does not allow negotiations to take place.

Similarly, the Rules of Procedure are often said to be in need of a revision. But the Rules of Procedure do not prohibit negotiations. On the contrary, the Rules merely seek to structure, guide and expedite the work of the Conference on Disarmament. Nevertheless, there seems to be an abundance of experts on Rules of Procedure, just as there appears to be an abundance of interpretations of various Rules. An Ad Hoc Committee would sometimes appear to mean two different things to different delegations, whilst a Programme of Work can apparently even mean three different things to only two different delegations.

Madam President,

The consensus rule in the CD has often also been mentioned as the main reason why the Conference has not been able to negotiate anything in the last couple of years. But is it not perhaps the misuse of the consensus rule, rather than the rule itself, that has created the problem? The consensus rule does not apply itself; it is the Members of the CD that choose when and how to apply it. When it is used to block the commencement – not the finalization – of negotiations, one can perhaps understand why some refer to the “tyranny of consensus”. We should therefore not forget that it is the Member States who decide whether or not to negotiate: not the “machinery”, or the institution.

The lack of negotiations in the CD has been ascribed to a number of things, but many delegations and commentators often refer to the lack of political will as a cause – or perhaps the main cause – of the absence of progress in the Conference over the years.

In this regard, we should not overlook the fact that we as representatives of our countries have an important role to play in recommending courses of action to our principals that may influence or shape the exercise of political will.

Madam President,

In his closing remarks as CD President last week, the Ambassador of the United Kingdom reminded delegations that the perfect should not become the enemy of the good. In fact, my delegation would go even further by saying that if we wait for the perfect Programme of Work to be adopted by the CD, we will probably wait for a very long time. None of the 2008 CD Presidents has claimed that CD/1840 is perfect: a fact that has been recognised by a number of delegations since the formal tabling of the document. My delegation certainly also does not believe that CD/1840 is perfect, much as document L.1 also was not perfect in 2007. However, whilst not perfect, my delegation believes that CD/1840 represents that which is possible and practical under the present circumstances.

Madam President,

All Member States obviously have priorities, but different priorities need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. With a little ingenuity and a lot of flexibility and compromise it should be possible for us to work with – and not against – each other. My delegation therefore stands ready to join a consensus on document CD/1840.

I thank you, Madam President.