

# Statement before the Disarmament Commission

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I will begin today by congratulating Ambassador Andrzej Towpik for his election as Chairman of this session of the Disarmament Commission and also by commending the work of the former Chairman, Ambassador Piet de Klerk. I assure all delegations that the Office for Disarmament Affairs will do all it can to assist this Commission in the weeks ahead.

One of my goals today will be to attempt to place our deliberations into some historical context, for this context is shaping our work in many ways. It is of course no secret that the Commission has encountered its share of difficulties in recent years. It has been unable to adopt new guidelines for a full decade. Some critics, who may not fully understand the Commission's mandate or history, have questioned its usefulness and doubted its contributions to disarmament.

Clearly, the Commission's difficulties in consensus-building have a long history, dating back to its establishment in 1952 following the collapse of the UN's early efforts in nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control. At its first special session on disarmament in 1978, the General Assembly re-established the Commission as "a deliberative body" with a mandate to consider and make recommendations to the General Assembly on disarmament issues.

By 1999, the Commission had fulfilled its mandate by adopting by consensus some 16 texts of principles, guidelines, or recommendations—all summarized by the Secretary-General in a Note that year to the General Assembly (A/51/182/Rev.1). This shows that the Commission has been able to make progress even in times of great uncertainty and international tensions.

The atmosphere today is quite different. The Cold War is over and we have all witnessed a new cascade of disarmament initiatives. We have seen new proposals from the nuclear-weapon states, from former senior statesmen in several countries, and from groups in civil society. Japan and Australia have established a new international commission to focus on

nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. Last October, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made his own five-point proposal for nuclear disarmament. All of these add to the many nuclear disarmament resolutions adopted each year by the General Assembly.

We have also seen a cascade of initiatives to address challenges posed by conventional armaments, including cluster munitions, the trade in conventional arms, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, explosive remnants of war, and landmines. And amid a global financial crisis, public demands are growing for new limits on military spending. Together, all of these issues constitute the agenda of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” which the General Assembly has designated as our collective “ultimate objective.”

If the Disarmament Commission was able to reach a consensus in difficult times, it can surely find the political will to move forward when the political environment is significantly improving.

The Commission continues to perform a useful role in the broader UN disarmament machinery. Unlike the General Assembly and the Conference on Disarmament, this Commission provides a forum for the focused deliberation of two or three specific items, with the goal of achieving a consensus that could strengthen or create disarmament norms. This special ability to focus its deliberations helps to define the Commission’s place in the “division of labour” in the UN disarmament machinery—it is the Commission’s “value added” within this system.

I therefore wish to commend the many efforts that have already been made both from this podium and among the delegations to resume the productive work of this Commission. I know the difficulties ahead—the issues are complex and the process of reaching consensus is never easy. Yet if these were easy issues to address, they would never have been brought here in the first place. The substantive issues before this Commission are here precisely because they are difficult, and this makes the process of consensus building all the more important.

Given the importance of these issues, I hope that the Commission will be able to adopt an agenda for this session and that it will engage in meaningful and productive discussions over the

weeks ahead. I wish all delegations well in their efforts to find some common ground, and reiterate my own Office's determination to assist your efforts in any way we can. I look forward to working with you for a successful outcome of this session.