

Two Cheers for First Committee — or One-Handed Applause?

by Jayantha Dhanapala

Last year I concluded that the proceedings of the General Assembly's First Committee were sombre. At the first session of the General Assembly in the 21st century and after the historic Millennium Summit how can one describe this year's proceedings of this Disarmament and International Security forum? Does the record of 49 resolutions - 21 of them voted upon and 28 adopted without a vote in four weeks of debate mean we have advanced in our goal towards general and complete disarmament?

It is not a question of perceiving the glass to be half empty or half full. At the very least the danger of the glass springing a leak has been arrested. In fact, more was achieved. In a remarkably better atmosphere it is possible to conclude that the member states did agree to move the disarmament agenda forward consolidating existing treaties and beginning the process of building new norms. They did so in the afterglow of the successful adoption of a Final Document at the April/May 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT); the decision of the President of the USA to postpone the deployment of the National Missile Defence system; and of dramatic political developments in the Korean Peninsula and the Balkans. The symbiotic link between disarmament and security was thus underlined.

The success of the NPT which binds 187 states parties had its impact mainly on the resolution "Towards a nuclear weapon free world: the need for a new agenda" proposed by the New Agenda Coalition (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden and South Africa) and the Japanese resolution "A path to the total elimination of nuclear weapons". The substantial votes for these resolutions helped to consolidate the success of the NPT Conference transposing the "unequivocal commitment" to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear weapons through 13 steps into a more universal UNGA context. The fact that some nuclear weapon states abstained and that the three non-NPT nuclear weapons capable states voted against the NAC resolution reminds us that we have still some way to go. Of the 21 resolutions voted upon 11 were on nuclear issues all of which garnered more votes in their favor than in 1999.

In conventional arms, controversies were less strident despite some disputes on transparency and its selectivity vis-à-vis categories of armaments. Intensive consultations resulted in a firm decision on the date and venue of the 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects enabling a sharper focus henceforth on the political content of that important gathering. Two ground breaking studies by panels of governmental experts were launched for completion by 2002 — one on missiles and another on disarmament education. Apart from Review Conferences of Treaties and other meetings of Treaty parties — CTBT, BWC, CCW, Mine Ban Convention — there was still little prospect of a much needed SSOD IV or the Secretary-General's proposed international conference for the elimination of nuclear dangers.

In general, alliance and group solidarity appeared to be less rigid. The influence of civil society and NGO lobbying is growing although their voices have still to be heard in the actual discussions. We have surely taken some positive steps forward. The world will now be watching closely for further progress, while

being vigilant for any signs of backtracking. If this recent advance in multilateral disarmament diplomacy proves to be illusory, the applause for this year's First Committee achievements will have been one-handed.

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