

Remarks to Disarmament Fellows

**The Current Disarmament Agenda of the UN
and the Role of UNODA in its Implementation**

By

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Let me begin by saying quite simply but sincerely, welcome to the United Nations.

Some of you may have worked here before, either within the Secretariat or for your permanent missions to the United Nations in New York. And some of you may be making your first visit here. You are all welcome and I wish to congratulate each of you for having demonstrated a personal interest in the work of the United Nations in disarmament.

As you know, the agenda of the United Nations in disarmament is determined by its member states. In the Secretariat, most of our mandates come from the General Assembly, but some also come from the Security Council, and others come to us pursuant to our responsibilities under—or relating to—multilateral treaties. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for example, has no permanent secretariat, so the United Nations Secretariat—specifically the Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and its predecessor the Department for Disarmament Affairs—has served as the *de facto* secretariat for the various meetings and sessions of this treaty's preparatory committees and review conferences.

Our agenda here in UNODA is clearly not static or frozen in time. For example, when our member states were working on establishing a Programme of Action (PoA) against the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons back in 2001, we were given certain mandates to promote the objectives of the PoA, through assisting member states and working together with representatives of civil society.

One of our most important responsibilities is to keep the Secretary-General fully informed about current developments relating to disarmament and several related subjects, including arms control, non-proliferation, and the challenge of preventing non-state actors from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. We further assist him by

offering ideas on initiatives the United Nations could promote to advance disarmament goals.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the UN agenda in disarmament, however, is how stable it has been over time, while remaining adaptable to new circumstances. Many of you might not know that the elimination of atomic weapons and other weapons “adaptable to mass destruction” was a goal included in the General Assembly’s first resolution in January 1946. Some might say that disarmament is therefore among the oldest—if not the oldest—goal of the UN organization.

Disarmament was mentioned twice in the UN Charter, dealing with the respective responsibilities of the General Assembly and the Security Council, but the Charter never mentioned nuclear weapons since they were unheard of when the Charter was signed in June 1945. Although the Charter did not assign any specific disarmament responsibilities to the Secretary-General or the Secretariat, the General Assembly and Security Council soon created such mandates, as it became more and more apparent that the Secretariat had important work to do in assisting member states to advance their common aims of disarmament and the regulation of armaments.

In practical terms, this encompassed efforts to eliminate all nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons—that is, weapons of mass destruction—and the limitation or regulation of the production, trade, or use of conventional arms. In 1959, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 1378, which placed on its agenda “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” (GCD)—this became the UN’s “ultimate objective” at the General Assembly’s first Special Session in 1978, the same special session that created the UN Programme of Fellowships on Disarmament. The whole idea of GCD essentially amounts to a fusion of WMD disarmament and conventional arms control – and this continues to shape the agenda of the United Nations in the field of disarmament.

For example, UNODA is working to promote nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, while also doing what we can to address the problem of nuclear terrorism—the last two responsibilities are handled largely through our work in promoting the implementation of Security Council resolution 1540, which obligates states to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or their acquisition by non-state actors. Our regional workshops and publications seek to advance these goals, along with our other work to assist states parties to key treaties—including the NPT, the Biological Weapons Convention, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty—when they meet for their regular scheduled meetings.

Consistent with the UN's longstanding objective of pursuing the goals of GCD, we also work on a large number of objectives relating to conventional arms. In addition to our work in assisting our member states to prevent the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, we maintain important transparency measures—specifically, the Register of Conventional Arms and the Standardized Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditures. We are assisting our member states in their efforts to adopt an Arms Trade Treaty and to achieve the goals of the new convention on cluster munitions. We maintain a regular database on the status of memberships to all key disarmament and arms control agreements. We also seek to promote the objectives of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons—also known as the Inhumane Weapons Convention.

These are just some highlights of the agenda that guides our work in UNODA. But the question remains, how specifically do we pursue these objectives?

First of all, we assist the Secretary-General in many ways—by writing notes and memoranda for his attention about key events in this field, by assisting in the drafting of his speeches and other public remarks, and by working closely with other offices and

departments in the Secretariat to make sure they understand what we are doing in disarmament and appreciate its importance for the UN organization as a whole.

We also work very closely with member states, mostly through their permanent missions here in New York or their offices in Geneva. Our three regional centres of peace and disarmament—in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia/Pacific—work closely with local and national officials to assist them in achieving goals agreed by member states in the UN disarmament machinery, namely the UN Disarmament Commission, the General Assembly’s First Committee, and ultimately, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. We do so largely through training programmes, workshops, joint seminars, and other such events.

Yet we do not only work with governments. We also work closely with individuals and groups in civil society, who make their own important contributions to advancing disarmament objectives. We help them to meet here at the United Nations and to meet with representatives of member states. These groups are often good sources of information about disarmament developments and have also been helpful in proposing future initiatives. It was a group of NGOs, for example, that went to the trouble to draft a model “nuclear weapon convention” to stimulate discussion on how nuclear disarmament can be reinforced by the force of law. They have also helped a lot in educating the public about relevant issues, including the dangers from the illicit trade in small arms, for example. Historically, the NGOs also had major roles to play in ultimately achieving a global ban on atmospheric nuclear tests and in concluding a treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines.

So this, in bare outline, is the agenda we follow in UNODA and some of the many ways we go about our daily work. I do not wish to leave you with any misinterpretations—the future of disarmament will surely be driven not by the UN Secretariat or any other single part of the UN disarmament machinery. The most

important decisions are still made by our sovereign member states. Yet the United Nations still has some unique contributions to make. We're indispensable as a common global forum and arena for deliberating challenges that face all countries. We have an essential role in collectively legitimizing international actions—such as when the General Assembly approves the texts of treaties that were negotiated in the Conference on Disarmament. We assist in various ways to strengthen the rule of law, by promoting universal membership and full compliance with treaties and by trying to identify new fields where treaties are needed. And I believe as countries and peoples become more closely linked by networks of trade, transportation, and communication, these roles will become even more important in the years to come.

So I welcome you not only to the United Nations. I welcome you to this great field of disarmament, and wish you the very best in all your work to advance this cause.