

Closing Remarks

Conference Overview

By

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For Peace and Development: Disarm Now!

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I welcome this opportunity to address all who have attended and contributed to this extraordinarily useful conference. Much of the credit for its success must go to the Government of Mexico—not just for organizing this event but, more broadly, for working persistently and effectively to develop and strengthen multilateral norms for disarmament.

I also commend the many professional efforts of my colleagues in the UN's Department for Public Information for once again making this annual DPI/NGO conference so productive an event. And I of course wish to recognize the invaluable contributions from representatives of civil society in this conference's planning process—and indeed, the contributions of individual participants in the course of our work over the last three days.

Now, I know you are all aware that the subject of disarmament has its share of sceptics. Such sentiments were well captured several decades ago by Ambassador Zenon Rossides, a former permanent representative of Cyprus to the UN, who once defined the verb “to *disarm*” as “an irregular verb with no first person singular and only a future tense.”ⁱ

We have encountered at our conference plenty of evidence to sustain that definition. We have identified some significant gaps between words and deeds in the field of disarmament. We all know how governments, especially with respect to nuclear disarmament, have tended to treat this as merely an “ultimate goal” or some distant vision—rather than as an obligation requiring concrete actions.

Yet our deliberations have also revealed that times are changing. The Presidents of the Russian Federation and the United States have made individual and joint statements affirming their commitment to this goal, and they have stated that they view this responsibility as deriving from their obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On 24 September, the UN Security Council will meet for its first-ever summit addressing nuclear disarmament issues, and President Obama will preside over that meeting. The same day, the UN will host a meeting of signatories to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty to consider ways to promote its early entry into force.

Preparatory procedural work for the 2010 NPT Review Conference has been completed on a positive note. The Conference on Disarmament has broken a 12-year stalemate and seems poised to begin work early next year on a fissile material treaty. Authoritative voices all over the world have been raised in favour of the need for serious efforts towards eliminating nuclear weapons, preventing proliferation, and ensuring the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Almost one year ago, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented his five-point plan for nuclear disarmament, which he elaborated in his opening address to this Conference.

These encouraging developments—plus the outpouring of interest from civil society around the world for progress in nuclear disarmament—could hardly create a more favourable climate for this conference. Seizing this momentum, you have examined the prospects for progress and reflected on the obstacles that still lie ahead of us.

Here is what you have accomplished. You have sent a strong signal that civil society must be included as an active participant in the process of achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world. Countless disarmament groups have supported this goal for many years. What is changing today is the diversity of groups that are involved in this process—diverse both substantively and geographically.

This is also true with respect to challenges relating to armed conflict and, in particular, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons—the subject of many meetings at this conference. And I am especially pleased to acknowledge in this context the invaluable contributions from women in advancing new controls and in addressing victim needs.

It is sometimes said “many hands make light work.” Well we certainly now have many hands to lighten the burdens that the disarmament NGOs have had to bear almost single-handedly for so many decades. Women and youth groups have taken a special interest in this issue, because they are all profoundly aware of the human and environmental effects from the use of even one nuclear weapon. We have also heard from doctors, scholars, religious groups, local and regional government officials, human rights activists, artists, and advocates for social and economic development—I must add, from across the globe.

As I think about our deliberations, I sense the growing emergence of a genuine community of shared interests and values—one resembling even in some ways a family. One of the key aims of this conference was to promote networking among the participants—and I know that lots of business cards got exchanged here in the last three days.

Today is not, therefore, simply the date a conference ended, but a potential turning point leading to a new era in the growth of our expanding global family of disarmament. Our memories from this conference will involve thoughts not of walls, but of bridges. We will see new opportunities, not just the familiar old obstacles. We will see clearly that what we have accomplished here is to strengthen the political foundation upon which nuclear disarmament can be built.

I am certain that those of you here today who never thought much about disarmament—relative to your other compelling concerns in peace building or development—now understand much better how progress in disarmament will serve precisely those causes, and indeed, how the lack of such progress will create grave risks for your most solemn goals. And those of you who have devoted much of your careers and lives to disarmament undoubtedly now have a better understanding of how getting rid of nuclear weapons serves a much wider range of goals than simply disarmament per se.

Perhaps the best outcome of this conference is a new shared appreciation that the case for disarmament rests less upon appeals to fear than on its positive contributions in building a better world for all. This is why Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called nuclear disarmament a “global public good of the highest order”—whose benefits are not monopolized by any one country but shared by all.

The Conference’s agreed Declaration is fully consistent with this global vision—it goes far beyond the mere identification of general goals, and offers guidance on very specific objectives that merit the sustained work of civil society and its partners and supporters in government.

So I will leave this conference deeply aware that—despite our different professions, nationalities, income levels, genders, and ages—we stand for something very important in this world and are willing to devote our time and trouble to pursue it. My colleagues and I at the Office for Disarmament Affairs are eager to work with you as we commence the challenging journey that lies ahead. Let our common journey begin today.

ⁱ Cited by Nicholas A. Sims, Approaches to Disarmament (London: Quaker Peace & Service, 1979), p. 6.