

Opening Remarks

By

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***United Nations Regional Workshop for East and Southeast Asia
on Strengthening the Capacity of the Media in Advocating
And Promoting Peace and Disarmament***

Beijing, China
20 January 2011

I am very grateful for this honour to welcome all participants to this workshop on strengthening the media's role in advocating and promoting peace and disarmament in Asia and the Pacific. I am also happy to have the opportunity to return to Beijing, where I spent three very stimulating years as Ambassador for my country.

We are fortunate to have with us today representatives of the media from 11 countries and experts on disarmament from international organizations and academic institutes. Credit for organizing this workshop is of course shared by the UN's Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific, and the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association. I commend them for organizing this event and selecting such a worthy subject.

I also wish to express my personal appreciation to Ambassador Cheng Jingye, who serves as the Director-General of the Department of Arms Control and Disarmament in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The workshop could not have taken place without the generous financial support of his Ministry. This support will open opportunities to build partnerships with the media to advance disarmament goals within this region and potentially beyond.

I am pleased that this is the first of three workshops we are planning on this issue in the Asia/Pacific region. It is also the first UN meeting in recent years focusing on the media's role in advocating and promoting disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation.

This raises a fair question: why focus on the media, when it is widely recognized that key disarmament decisions are made by sovereign States? The answer lies in the unique roles played by the media in shaping the wider relationship between government and society—roles that will certainly have implications for the future of disarmament efforts.

The media offer governments a source of information about the conditions and expectations of the people, as conveyed in news reporting and commentaries. Yet the media also supply information that educates people about the world around them—information that helps the public to shape its own expectations about government policies, priorities, and agendas. The media also offer a means to maintain some accountability in the achievement of public policies, through their reporting of both progress and setbacks in pursuing declared goals.

Of course, the media are not just a public service. In most countries, they are businesses that survive on subscriptions, advertising, and other types of income—and these will vary with the level of public interest in specific issues. While the media reflect public demands for progress in certain policy fields, they can also serve to strengthen such demands.

While the commercial media's dependence on the public marketplace offers many opportunities to advance global causes—including disarmament—it also creates some undesirable incentives for sensationalism, or for the publishing of stories more for their sales potential than for their substantive merit. The antidote for this is found both in journalistic professionalism and in an awareness throughout the journalist community of the many ways that global developments affect the future of countries and the interests of their citizens.

These roles and responsibilities of the media have grown in importance in recent decades due to the process of globalization, which has been reinforced—if not driven—by the incredible revolution in communications technologies, resulting in a significant expansion of both the audiences and the variety of subjects being opened for public discourse.

For those of us who work in disarmament, this particular revolution is most welcome, since it has had the effect of making the public more aware not only of the great dangers from existing arms races and rising military expenditures, but also of the merits of disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation as alternative paths to a more secure world.

I am especially pleased to address this workshop because disarmament and arms control are among our oldest priorities at the UN. The General Assembly's first resolution, adopted in 1946, identified the goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons and other weapons adaptable to mass destruction. Parallel efforts were soon underway to limit conventional armaments. Together, these comprise "general and complete disarmament under effective international control," which has been the UN's "ultimate objective" for over 30 years.

The need for progress in disarmament and arms control clearly relates to the legacy of the last century of wars and preparations for wars—a legacy that has included the loss of millions of innocent civilian lives. It has long been recognized worldwide that weapons of mass destruction, along with illicit transfers of conventional arms, jeopardize international peace and security and other goals of the UN Charter.

In addition, massive global military expenditures are each year diverting more and more scarce resources badly needed for social, economic and human development, which hinders the ability of nations to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stated, "every dollar spent on weapons is one less spent on schools, life-saving medicine, or research into life-affirming technologies."

With respect to nuclear weapons, all previous Secretaries-General have recognized their unique threats, but Secretary-General Ban took these concerns further in October 2008 by launching his five-point proposal for achieving global nuclear disarmament, which he further elaborated in his Action Plan of 8 December 2009.

His plan emphasizes strengthening the "rule of law" in disarmament, including the idea of pursuing a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments; the ratification of all the protocols to the treaties establishing regional nuclear-weapon-free zones; the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty; the negotiation of a treaty to prohibit the production of fissile material for weapons; and the consideration of other legal restraints for conventional arms, missiles, and space weapons.

After decades of setbacks in nuclear disarmament, efforts in the past two years have yielded some very positive momentum, as seen in the adoption of an action plan at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and the conclusion and anticipated entry into force of the new START treaty. This positive trend was assisted by some enlightened leadership from the States with the two largest nuclear arsenals, and from other concerned States in the world community. Yet I believe that advocacy efforts by civil society are also undeniably contributing to this process, and these depend heavily upon frequent and accurate reporting by the news media.

If progress were inevitable, there would be little need for this workshop. There are many obstacles ahead, recognizing that over 20,000 nuclear weapons remain in this world. It is sobering to note that over half the world's population currently lives in countries that either have nuclear weapons or are members of nuclear alliances. In the field of disarmament, it is unfortunately true that when all is said and done, more has been said than done.

Fortunately, it is possible that the treaty or treaties to follow the new START Treaty will require the verified and irreversible destruction of warheads and delivery systems—rather than a mere cap on deployments—and this would be a clear indicator of progress. To encourage such progress and to achieve a nuclear weapon-free world will require a long-term effort by all governments and their citizens. This is how momentum is sustained.

And this will necessarily involve a significant role for the media—in keeping the public informed, in reporting public expectations, in describing and assessing progress and setbacks, and in keeping the issue as a high priority in public policy. These contributions apply not only to disarmament, but also to advancing the goals of non-proliferation and the prevention of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction.

The media has done much to assist civil society efforts for disarmament, to expose illicit traffickers of weaponry, and to prevent terrorists from acquiring the world's deadliest weapons. Yet more needs to be done, as uses of either weapons of mass destruction or illicitly traded conventional arms have characteristically had catastrophic effects on civilian populations, which continue to face pressing social and economic needs.

Against this background, this Workshop is aimed at further increasing the knowledge and expertise of the media in disarmament and non-proliferation and at finding ways to enhance partnerships among the United Nations, international organizations, and individuals working on disarmament-related issues in the media.

The UN stands ready to work closely with partners from the media to achieve a safer and better world. The Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific has over the past twenty years actively worked on raising awareness, supporting dialogue, and promoting disarmament and non-proliferation education in the Asia and Pacific region.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank our friends from the media for their support and cooperation and hope this partnership will continue and expand.

Finally, I invite you all to draw some inspiration on the eve of the Year of the Hare, a time for creativity, compassion and friendliness. Such qualities offer a solid foundation for the partnerships needed on our common journey to a nuclear-weapon-free world. In this spirit, I wish you all a productive discussion in charting a course to fulfil this great and historic goal.