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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS TO THE DISARMAMENT COMMISSION

New York, 7 April 2008

(As delivered)

Mr. Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,

I welcome this opportunity to address the Disarmament Commission, a venerable component of the United Nations that is as important today as when it was set up fifty-six years ago.

Let me start by congratulating Ambassador de Klerk of the Netherlands on assuming the prime responsibility for guiding this Commission. I thank the departing Chairman of last year's session, Ambassador Rosselli of Uruguay, for his strenuous and successful efforts to achieve its work.

I came here today to underscore the importance I attach to this Commission, which performs a unique function in the UN disarmament machinery, serving as a deliberative body that reports to the General Assembly.

This session is especially important because it is the last in the Commission's three-year cycle. Now is the time for all Member States to make extra efforts to seek a consensus.

These efforts are essential given the vital importance of disarmament and non-proliferation in shaping international peace and security. We must all work together – the Secretariat, Member States and civil society – to reinvigorate our collective efforts to reach our shared goals in these fields.

Failure is not an option. Its consequences could well jeopardize many other goals of the Charter and the security and well being of all our Member States.

At last year's session, I expressed regret that setbacks in the field of disarmament have become the norm, not an exception. I called on you to move forward in a spirit of compromise and accommodation.

Today, I am renewing this call with an even greater sense of urgency.

Countries across the world take very seriously the challenges posed by weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear arms – including risks from their continued existence, their geographical spread, and the possibility that they could fall into the hands of terrorists.

And States are also highly conscious of the need to regulate conventional arms because of the risks they pose to security interests, and the obstacles they create for economic and social development.

But despite a collective awareness about these risks and challenges, the world is still confronted with twin dangers: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the excessive accumulation of conventional arms.

Multilateral cooperation remains absolutely indispensable in pursuing the noble goals of disarmament and non-proliferation. This is a solemn duty that cannot be fulfilled through confrontation, condemnation or the adoption of intractable policy positions. A true sense of mutual understanding and respect, give-and-take, and prudent flexibility are needed.

There is little doubt that we will not go far if each delegation proceeds expecting to achieve – here and now – nothing less than a 100 per cent of their desired objectives. The pursuit of maximalist goals by some will yield only minimal results for all. Worse, we could see this institution itself decline under a cloud of pessimism and despair.

It is not a defeat to move forward today on those issues where progress is possible, and to pursue other goals tomorrow. There is no shame or loss of pride in acting according to the laws of reason.

And there is really no responsible alternative: the international community must work together and demonstrate its resolve to move from challenges and opportunities to concrete results. Partial victories are still victories. Small steps forward are still steps forward.

Some may say that so much more needs to be done. This is no doubt true, but it is no excuse for lagging where progress is possible.

Since it is indeed possible to make progress on the issues before the Commission, I believe that this body does not have the option of closing its current session by relegating these matters to “unfinished business.” The time to finish this business is now.

The approach I am recommending does not amount to abandoning ambition or endorsing the “least common denominator” as the highest form of wisdom. On the contrary, I believe that incremental progress in this institution can have positive spill-over effects across the UN’s disarmament machinery. It can also help in cultivating a positive climate for addressing disarmament issues in other multilateral

forums, including those dealing with treaty regimes. In short, progress and success can be contagious – what is gained in one part of the system can benefit the whole.

This is true not just about the way we address the challenges of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation – it also applies to the pursuit of practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional weapons. Although the international community has made some significant progress in this area in recent years – especially in addressing the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons – new conventional-weapon issues are emerging, while old problems still demand solutions. The fact that conventional arms continue to kill many thousands of people every year is often overlooked, except, of course, by the States and individuals suffering most from this bloodshed.

The next three weeks offer a chance for you to reach consensus on recommendations about the important issues at hand, bringing the Commission's three-year effort to a successful conclusion. I hope you'll take this opportunity to demonstrate the Commission's continuing potential as an important, even indispensable, part of the UN disarmament machinery.

Let me also assure you that the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs is here to offer its full cooperation and support for your work. The High Representative and his staff, as well as their colleagues from the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, will continue to provide the Commission with all the assistance it needs.

I wish you all an effective, successful and productive session.

Thank you very much.