

OEWG on taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations

Opening Session

Geneva, 22 February 2016

Opening Remarks

Chair, Colleagues, representatives of civil society,

I associate Ireland with the statement of the New Agenda Coalition.

I would like to add my voice to those who have welcomed Ambassador Thongphakdi as our Chair. We assure you and your team of our support. I would also like to say how much we value and appreciate the role of civil society and academia in supporting and informing our work. Civil society is our invaluable partner in this process and it is important that its role is one of full engagement and participation. I want to especially welcome the earlier presence and the words of former UNSG Kofi Annan. His presence and the weight of his authority and knowledge are an indication of the importance of the issues we are here to discuss. His words are a demonstration of the leadership we need to emulate.

I would like to pay tribute to Costa Rica for the excellent chairing of the previous OEWG in 2013, which did such impressive work and prepared the way for this one. I would also like to thank Tim Caughley of UNIDIR for his presentation on developments since then. It is important that we all begin on the same page. We meet here in Geneva this week under the auspices of the UN, with a strong mandate from a UN Resolution which attracted the support of 138 countries. We meet under GA rules of procedure, rules which we respect and in which we regularly place our trust and we do so again this week. We are here to focus on

progress in multilateral nuclear disarmament, one of the most important and yet somehow, also, one of the most neglected and marginalised issues of our time.

It is no accident or coincidence that multilateral nuclear disarmament was the focus of the very first UN Resolution over 70 years ago. Multilateral diplomacy is about a shared sense of collective responsibility. The UN and its related bodies were raised up from the ashes of a world which had been devastated by two world wars. The very essence of multilateralism is to embed cooperation and to ensure that such devastation, on such a scale, can never happen again. The primary objective of the UN, as set out in its Charter, was to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. Our predecessors at the UN knew back then, as we know now, the biggest threat to the future of humanity is the nuclear threat.

At many times in our history since 1945, effective multilateralism has pulled us back from the brink. But we do not have to go too far back to see how diplomatic courage, persistence and determination can deliver results, even in the most challenging of circumstances. I speak here of the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action with Iran, a tribute to the hard work and imagination of all concerned. I say imagination because no achievement can be reached unless it has first been imagined. No negotiation can be a success if those entering it do so in the expectation of failure.

So, multilateral diplomacy is also about choice, the choice to be creative, to be courageous and, most importantly, the choice to engage. All of us here today made a choice to be here. Those who are not here made a choice to stay away.

I regret that decision very much and I hope that it might yet be reversed in time for our next session. We need and welcome the contribution of a range of viewpoints and a genuine and frank debate. We need to hear as many voices as possible in the room. How else are we going to understand one another, learn from one another and make our best efforts to work towards a consensus outcome? Last year at the First Committee, those of us who put forward this Resolution were clear in our hopes for inclusivity and our ambition to work towards a general agreement. This is an Open Ended Working Group and the door is always open.

This is a time of great challenge, on the global stage, for nations and for all of humanity. All the more reason then for us to demonstrate leadership. All the more reason to step up to the challenges. All the more reason to face head on our international obligations, our commitments, our responsibilities. Last year saw two ground breaking international agreements, one on the Sustainable Development Goals and one on Climate. Two more examples of what is possible when we work together, face up to reality and focus on the future. But those agreements exist under the shadow of a potential nuclear detonation, which puts all our most important goals at risk.

This is a small planet, getting smaller every day. Our concept of the world as a vast and unconnected place has shifted to one where everything is interlinked and we are all part of one global village. In such a world, multilateralism comes to the fore. In this global democracy all voices are entitled to be heard. In such a world, questions of security impact us all. In such a world, the safety, security and existence of all humanity are at stake. And in such a world there is no place for nuclear weapons. That is what we are here to discuss.

This is something in fact that we already agree on. We all want a world free from nuclear weapons. In the words of the UN Secretary General himself, there are no right hands for the wrong weapons. We all know where we want to get to. Indeed we also seem to know how to get there, as those of us who are parties to the NPT have already signed up, not just to the Treaty itself but to the Principles and Procedures which formed the basis for its indefinite extension in 1995, the thirteen Practical Steps in 2000 and the Action Plan in 2010. In addition, over 100 countries and over 50% of the earth's surface now comprise nuclear weapons free zones. And thanks to recent conferences and research which have shone a spotlight on this issue, we are more aware than ever of the catastrophic humanitarian consequence of nuclear weapons and the impossible challenge of a humanitarian response. Indeed, at this point and knowing all that we know, it seems impossible to imagine any use of nuclear weapons that would not violate one or more rules of International Humanitarian Law. However, despite all of this, the problem is that we are no nearer multilateral nuclear disarmament now than we were 20 years ago, when the NPT was indefinitely extended.

In any other area of life, work or governance, if something wasn't working for over twenty years, or indeed over seventy years; we would try to fix it. We would look to see what was missing, what was preventing progress and we would try to fill that gap. That is our agenda here in this Open Ended Working Group. We are here to investigate how best to ensure real progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations. We are not here to negotiate; we are here to examine options. But we are also tasked in the UN Resolution with making concrete recommendations to the UN this Autumn.

In the past, we have been excellent at drawing up lists. But as we all know, just drawing up the list doesn't get the thing done. A long list of actions that is not time-bound and has no mechanism for tracking progress is little more than a wish-list. We are not going to wish nuclear disarmament into existence. Our ambition needs to be matched by our actions, not our action plans. And our actions need to keep pace with the mounting risks we all face.

The risk of a nuclear detonation, either by accident or on purpose, is probably higher now than it ever was. Indefinite retention means inevitable catastrophe. The longer nuclear weapons remain, the more complacency there is about them, the more likely it is that an accident will occur. There have been numerous documented near-misses which no doubt our second panel discussion will focus on later. And those are just the ones we know about. How much more is happening about which we are unaware? We are gambling with the life of the planet. Is this a gamble we want to continue to make? We often hear the phrase, "bearing in mind the wider security situation." Well, let us bear it mind. The emergence of threats from new non-state actors and more recently the growing threat of cyber terrorism only makes it even more necessary to rid the world of the last of the unprohibited weapons of mass destruction. Do we really want to wait until someone develops the capacity for a cyber-attack on nuclear launch mechanisms?

Do we really believe that the deterrence argument will work against today's greatest threats?

This is no time for complacency or business as usual. This is a time for informed concern and for collective action. We should feel that concern pressing at our backs as we meet here this week. We should feel the hand of history on our shoulders. There have been a lot of frustrations and disappointments in recent years. Let us put that sense of impatience to work for us now and turn it into determination to succeed. Ireland has a long and proud history within the United Nations. We are resolute in our commitment to the NPT. Under that treaty, all States Parties and not just those that possess nuclear weapons, have an obligation to pursue effective measures towards nuclear disarmament negotiations. Ireland takes that obligation very seriously and we intend to continue to do our utmost to see progress achieved, here and in all other disarmament fora. We expect others to do no less.

Chair,

We have an opportunity now that is denied us in the rest of our disarmament machinery, stalled for decades and preoccupied with process and procedure. We have an opportunity here for real and genuine debate, open to all and blockable by none. I hope that the spirit which inspired the foundation of the United Nations, the same spirit that gave us the Sustainable Development Goals, the Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, will inform our work here this week and future sessions. It's taken us long enough to get here. I wish you well in your role as Chair.

I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.