

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

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ENGLISH

FINAL RECORD OF THE ONE THOUSAND AND FIFTY-FOURTH PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 22 February 2007, at 10.15 a.m.

President: Mr. Juan Antonio MARCH (Spain)

The PRESIDENT: I declare open the 1054th plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament.

At the outset, I wish to extend a warm welcome, on behalf of the Conference on Disarmament, to His Excellency Mr. Kim Howells, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who will address the Conference.

We highly appreciate this demonstration of the great importance that the Government of the United Kingdom attaches to arms control and disarmament, and in particular to the work of this forum.

It is my honour and pleasure to invite His Excellency Mr. Kim Howells to address the Conference.

Mr. HOWELLS (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland): Mr. President, it is a great pleasure to return after a year, I think, to this most important forum. It is a privilege for me because the United Kingdom is committed to the principles and practice of multilateral nuclear disarmament. We consider this forum critical to its achievement. That is why I am here, as United Kingdom's Minister responsible for disarmament, for the second year in succession.

At the end of last year we published a White Paper in the United Kingdom explaining the reasoning behind our Government's decision to maintain a nuclear deterrent. The British public has the opportunity to weigh up the arguments for several months before a final parliamentary vote.

I am here today to demonstrate we are committed to transparency internationally as well as domestically. I know that our White Paper was made available to this Conference at the time of its publication in the United Kingdom. I will not attempt - you will be relieved to know - to summarize the whole document here and now, but instead present the issues of most relevance to this forum, and try to react to some of the points made in a powerful speech on disarmament and non-proliferation last November by the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.

Firstly, I should make clear what we are deciding now. The United Kingdom is deciding whether to begin the concept and design work required to make possible a replacement for our current submarine fleet, or whether to maintain the option of using the D5 missile system beyond its current life expectancy.

This does not mean that we are taking an irreversible decision that commits us irrevocably to possessing nuclear weapons in 40 or 50 years' time. Indeed, our White Paper is clear that the United Kingdom remains committed to the goal of a world free from nuclear weapons.

It does mean, however, that the United Kingdom needs to ensure that we have the capability in 17 years' time to retain a submarine-based deterrent, and that, on present evidence, we have to assume that we will need to do so. And it gives me no pleasure to say that.

(Mr. Howells, United Kingdom)

The rationale on how we reached this judgement can be read in the White Paper, but it boils down to this: we do not believe that the circumstances currently exist for the United Kingdom safely to choose now unilaterally to renounce our nuclear weapons.

I agree with Kofi Annan that the non-proliferation regime has been successful: since 1970 more States have given up their ambitions for nuclear weapons than have acquired them. But I disagree with his subsequent assertion that “there is no ... threat to ... national security that nuclear weapons could deter”.

As Kofi Annan himself acknowledged, substantial nuclear arsenals remain; the net number of nuclear-armed States has increased, not decreased, and there continue to be significant risks of new nuclear-armed States emerging. So on current evidence and trends, the United Kingdom simply cannot be confident that a nuclear threat to our vital interests will not emerge in the time frame we have to consider. And given - as Kofi Annan argues - the uniquely dangerous threat posed by nuclear weapons, we are clear that only the threat of retaliation in kind can deter attempts to blackmail us with nuclear weapons.

Some suggest that it is hypocritical for the United Kingdom to maintain its nuclear weapons while calling on others to desist from their development. Kofi Annan categorized them as “disarmament first” advocates.

Let me make clear that the United Kingdom does not belong to an opposite camp that insists on “non-proliferation first”. We agree wholeheartedly with Kofi Annan that both approaches lead to what he called “mutually assured paralysis”, which “... sends a terrible signal of disunity and ... creates a vacuum that can be exploited”.

The United Kingdom fully accepts Kofi Annan’s proposition that progress must be made on the disarmament and non-proliferation tracks in parallel. The United Kingdom White Paper on the deterrent makes clear our continuing commitment to meet our obligations under article VI of the NPT.

The United Kingdom has therefore decided to reduce its stockpile of operationally available warheads by a further 20 per cent, to less than 160. Significant enough though this is, it is just the latest in a series of dramatic reductions in the United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons. Since the end of the cold war, the explosive power of United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons will now have been reduced by no less than 75 per cent. The United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons account for less than 1 per cent now of the global inventory.

We have withdrawn and dismantled our tactical maritime and airborne nuclear capabilities. We have terminated the nuclear Lance missile and artillery roles that we undertook with United States nuclear weapons held under dual-key arrangements. As a consequence we have reduced our reliance on nuclear weapons to just one system, submarine-based Trident. We are the only nuclear-weapons State to have done this.

(Mr. Howells, United Kingdom)

We have also significantly reduced the operational status of our nuclear weapons system: our Trident submarines are normally at several days' notice to fire". Their missiles are not targeted at any country.

Renewing the Trident system does not reverse or undermine any of these positive disarmament steps. The United Kingdom is retaining, not modernizing its deterrent. There is no change in the capabilities of the system, no move to produce more usable weapons, no change in nuclear posture or doctrine. The United Kingdom's nuclear system will not be designed for war-fighting use in military campaigns. It is a strategic deterrent that we would only ever contemplate using in extreme circumstances of self-defence. Over the last 50 years, it has been used only to deter acts of aggression against our vital interests, never to coerce others.

Our decision is simply about maintaining no more than the very minimum nuclear capability judged necessary for our security, whilst we continue to pursue in good faith the conditions set out in article VI for general and for complete disarmament. The simple truth is that the United Kingdom is implementing its obligations under the NPT, while those developing illicit nuclear weapons programmes are not.

Those conditions for complete disarmament cannot be created unilaterally. I think few, if any, of those present here today would argue that complete disarmament by a country with less than 1 per cent of the nuclear weapons in the world would make it any more likely that proliferators would abandon their ambitions.

And these conditions are not within our gift alone. It is something on which nuclear-weapons States and non-nuclear-weapons States alike have to work together.

The United Kingdom welcomes the series of bilateral agreements which have greatly reduced the major nuclear arsenals since the end of the cold war, and looks forward to further progress. It is clear to us that considerable bilateral progress will have to be made in reducing the large nuclear arsenals before it will be helpful and useful to include the small fraction of the global stockpile that belongs to us.

It is also reasonable to suggest that a world in which complete nuclear disarmament became a possibility would be one in which we could all be confident in the compliance by all States with their non-proliferation obligations under a universalized Non-Proliferation Treaty.

So the immediate and practical issue, it seems to me, is how to create the conditions for both of those objectives. In particular, what steps can we take to cap and set on an inevitably downward trend the numbers of weapons that are out there? This is what the people want to know.

Firstly, we can ban further explosive testing of nuclear weapons. We are close to this: all nuclear-weapons States have self-imposed moratoria on nuclear testing. A Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty has been negotiated, and we hope will come into force in due course.

(Mr. Howells, United Kingdom)

Secondly, we can cap the amount of weapons-usable fissile material. Most nuclear-weapons States have introduced moratoria on the production of fissile material for weapons use, and none object in principle to the negotiation of a treaty to formalize such a cap. And that, distinguished delegates, is where you come in.

The history of international negotiations on disarmament is, as you will be acutely aware, one of ups and downs, peaks and troughs. I will not try to argue this morning that we are currently riding the crest of a wave. We are not. But I will suggest that we are on the way up, and that there are a number of very good reasons for believing that some real progress is possible in the near future. God knows we need it.

This forum and its predecessors have an impressive record of achievements, beginning of course with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty itself. This forum has negotiated conventions covering biological, chemical and certain conventional weapons, and most recently the CTBT. So this is a place with an impressive track record. And we should remind ourselves of that and never allow that gloom that sometimes settles on this place to overwhelm us.

But as Henry Kissinger once said, in international politics, the solution to one set of difficulties is always the admission ticket to a new set of difficulties.

And the current set of difficulties facing this Conference have proven particularly challenging. I share with all of you frustration at the current stalemate, and a determination to break it. That is the determination we have to have. Happily the prospects for progress, I think, are now good. Since my visit here last year I have been kept posted on your activities. I know that you, sometimes with the benefit of visiting experts, have engaged in a great deal of in-depth discussion of the issues, and an exchange of information. I know that these exchanges have helped to build confidence and mutual trust around this room. I know also that you have had some notable successes, including most recently the productive CCW and BTWC review conferences. I also know that we now have in place another platform of Presidents with what seems to me to be an extremely intelligent, focused schedule of activities. A very important step forward.

I have explained why we, like most delegations here, see the negotiation of a fissile material cut-off treaty as the next logical phase for multilateral nuclear disarmament. Last year a broad negotiating mandate and a draft treaty were tabled. It was clear from the proposed mandate that everything was open to discussions once negotiations had started, though I would not begin to suggest that the negotiation itself will be easy. There will be areas where we will have some intense discussions, such as the scope of the treaty and its verifiability. But frankly, we should be able to reach agreement to begin negotiations without any preconditions. It is high time for the Conference on Disarmament to demonstrate once more to the international community that the Geneva spirit of being able to move beyond polemics to deliver practical answers to real world issues is vigorous and alive. The solution is in your hands.

Elsewhere on the nuclear disarmament agenda, the United Kingdom remains committed to the 13 practical steps agreed at the 2000 NPT RevCon. In addition to the actual arms reductions I

(Mr. Howells, United Kingdom)

have already described, we have significantly increased our transparency with regard to fissile material holdings. We have produced historical records of our defence holdings of both plutonium and highly enriched uranium. As I mentioned earlier, we ceased production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons in 1995. All excess fissile material stocks no longer required for defence purposes have been placed under international safeguards, and we no longer exercise our right as a nuclear-weapons State to withdraw from such stocks for use in nuclear weapons. We have not conducted a test nuclear explosion since 1991, and we ratified the CTBT in 1998.

All these measures of transparency have been very widely welcomed. But if for a moment I might depart from my script, I spend an enormous amount of my time now in the Middle East, and there the situation of proliferation is extremely acute. People want the reassurances that they get, at the very least, from that degree of transparency of being able to see very clearly what each of us is doing, what member States mean by this language. Might I urge you to consider that very carefully? None of us has anything to lose from that transparency. We have nothing to hide, and we should be shown not to be trying to hide anything. It is a very simple message, but a very important one. And we continue to look for more opportunities, where national security and non-proliferation constraints allow us. An example of this is the continuing work by the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston to develop our expertise in methods and techniques to verify publicly the multilateral reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons.

This year the international community will again begin to examine and review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The United Kingdom continues to regard the NPT as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the appropriate framework for nuclear disarmament. Our support for the Treaty is long-standing and has not diminished over time.

We fully recognize the right of States, in compliance with their NPT obligations, to use and benefit from nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, as set out in article IV. Nonetheless, we must be aware that certain nuclear technologies pose particularly acute proliferation risks. We are working therefore with the international community to underwrite the ability of States to utilize nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, without undermining our common interest in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and the means to produce them. We are working closely with IAEA on their multilateral nuclear approaches initiative and look forward to their report this summer.

I am aware of the challenges the NPT faces, particularly after the disappointing outcome of the 2005 Review Conference. And it was very, very disappointing. The disappointment I felt in New York at the United Nations conference was palpable, a sense of frustration that we had not moved forward. People felt it in a very real way. We have to remember that feeling. If we do not remember it, then I fear that we will be in that spiral of mistaking our technical difficulties, trying to excuse them as nevertheless being progress. It is not progress. I believe it is now for the international community to come together to work for the strengthening of the Treaty, because a weakened NPT will benefit no one. Towards this end we should look for areas where cooperation is possible, and we should be inclusive of others' views, discussing our differences openly and trying to find ways to resolve them - not using them as an excuse for lack of progress.

(Mr. Howells, United Kingdom)

I very much hope that the NPT PrepCom, scheduled to take place in Vienna in May, will be remarkable for a change in the atmosphere of the discussions; one of positive engagement and tolerance. The United Kingdom will certainly be working to this end over the next few months.

Finally, if I may, if you would indulge me, I would like to turn my attention to the important issue of conventional weapons. As many of you will know, the United Kingdom has been leading calls for work to be taken forward on a legally binding treaty on the trade in conventional arms. A treaty is needed to guarantee that governments put controls in place to ensure that arms deals are not allowed to go ahead unless they are confident that arms will not be misused, for example, in breach of United Nations sanctions, to escalate conflict, or by human rights abusers. But this of course needs to be a global effort because any new system will only function effectively if all countries agree, and stick to, a common set of high standards.

There was agreement in December to the start of a United Nations process. As a first step the United Nations Secretary-General has now sought views on the initiative. The deadline for response is the end of April, so time is short. It is vitally important that all countries look at this from their own national perspective and actively feed in their views to the Secretary-General. I urge you to do this. Only if these views are spelt out will we be able to work towards a treaty that will be truly representative of the needs of all countries, be they producers or importers, or developed or developing. And only if a treaty is drafted against this background will it enjoy wide support and be properly implemented.

It remains only for me to express my gratitude to you for arranging this plenary session to allow me to present the United Kingdom's perspective. It is a real privilege to be here. I very much want to emphasize the importance that the world places on the shoulders of all the delegates of this Conference. I can think of hardly anything that is more important, indeed nothing that is more important. I have enjoyed the experience of speaking once more at this Conference, and I very much applaud its vital work. I wish you all the best for a very successful and very important year ahead.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Minister Howells. We would also like to thank you very much for the very kind and substantial words you have addressed to the meeting.

I would like to ask delegations if anyone wants to take the floor to put questions to the Minister. That does not seem to be the case.

Unless a delegation wishes to take the floor, I would like to mention that this concludes our business for today at this formal plenary meeting. Our next plenary meeting will be held on Tuesday, 27 February at 10 a.m.

The informal plenary meeting on agenda item 6, under the guidance of Ambassador Wibisono, will begin in five minutes.

This plenary meeting is adjourned.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.