



General Assembly

Seventy-first session

First Committee

9th meeting

Wednesday, 12 October 2016, 3 p.m.
New York

Official Records

Chair: Mr. Boukadoum (Algeria)

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Agenda items 89 to 105 (continued)

General debate on all disarmament and international security agenda items

The Chair: Before proceeding with the informal segment to hear statements by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), I wish to inform delegations that I have received a request from the representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to make a statement under the general debate segment on all disarmament and international security agenda items allocated to the First Committee.

Members will recall that, at its organizational meeting on 30 September (see A/C.1/71/PV.1), the Committee decided that the general debate would run from 3 October to 11 October, with an informal segment on 12 October to hear statements by NGO representatives. The Vice-President of the ICRC arrived in New York yesterday evening and, based on her schedule, will be able to make her presentation today only. In view of the flexibility traditionally exercised by the Committee in scheduling its meetings to accommodate its rolling list of speakers, with the indulgence of the Committee, may I take it that the Committee is willing to allow a statement to be made today by the Vice-President of the ICRC, as part of the general debate, before presentations by civil society.

It was so decided.

The Chair: I now give the floor to the Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Ms. Beerli (International Committee of the Red Cross): I thank you, Sir, for your generosity. I am very honoured to be addressing the First Committee today to bring the field-based experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and our expertise in international humanitarian law to bear on some of the critical issues that will be discussed here.

For the ICRC, debates about weapons must always consider evidence of their foreseeable human costs in the light of the strict limits on the use of weapons imposed by international humanitarian law. Because of time constraints, I will read out an abridged version of the ICRC's general statement, the full text of which is available with the ICRC delegation and on our website.

States have a unique opportunity to make the seventy-first session of the General Assembly a turning point for progress towards prohibiting and completely eliminating the most destructive weapons ever invented — nuclear weapons. The international community now has before it overwhelming evidence of the horrific, long-term and irreversible effects of such weapons on health, the environment, the climate and food production — that is, on everything upon which human life depends. The evidence includes a key finding of the ICRC's own studies and those of United Nations agencies that there is no adequate humanitarian response capacity to assist the victims of nuclear weapons. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons were explicitly recognized six years ago by all States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and

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since then in several draft resolutions adopted by a large majority of States in the First Committee.

Having recognized those consequences, States now have a responsibility to take decisive action. And they have an unprecedented opportunity to do so by acting on the recommendation adopted with widespread support in August by the Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations that the General Assembly convene a conference in 2017, open to all, to negotiate a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination.

In 2011, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, of which the ICRC is a part, appealed to all States to pursue in good faith and conclude with urgency and determination negotiations to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons through a legally binding international agreement, based on existing commitments and international obligations. The Movement welcomes the fact that, five years later, such negotiations may become a reality through an inclusive process within the framework of the General Assembly.

Although prohibiting nuclear weapons is only one of the measures needed to ensure that they are never used again and are eliminated, it is also an indispensable building block in reaching the universal goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. As with chemical and biological weapons, unambiguous prohibition is both the foundation for disarmament and a disincentive for proliferation. That would be a long-awaited step towards fulfilling the NPT's article VI obligation to pursue effective measures to achieve nuclear disarmament, and honouring repeated undertakings under NPT action plans.

While at this time some States are unable to join negotiations to prohibit nuclear weapons, we nevertheless continue to call on them to take urgent interim steps to reduce the immediate risks of intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons. Such steps include reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military doctrines and plans and reducing the number of warheads on high alert. Those and other risk-reduction measures derive from long-standing political commitments, including the action plan of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and should be followed through as a matter of urgency. Given the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, any risk of use is unacceptable. Today's complex security

environment serves to highlight the urgency of both prohibiting nuclear weapons and taking action by nuclear-armed States to fulfil their existing obligations and political commitments, leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons once and for all.

Debates in the First Committee have highlighted increasing concerns about the weaponization and hostile use of outer space, with virtually all States seeking to prevent an arms race in outer space. Diplomatic initiatives should give due consideration to the potentially far-reaching humanitarian consequences on Earth that would result from direct attacks against dual-use satellites or incidental damage to civilian satellites, and to the limits already imposed by international humanitarian law on any form of warfare, including in space. The vulnerability of space-based systems that serve essential civilian activity on Earth presents significant challenges in ensuring respect for international humanitarian law rules of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack, which States should thoroughly consider in their deliberations on outer space.

The ICRC is gravely concerned about the use of classical and improvised chemical weapons in Syria over the past three years. While such use has been roundly condemned by the international community, there continue to be allegations of the new use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere. At this session of the First Committee, States should reaffirm the absolute prohibition on the use of chemical and biological weapons in armed conflict by any actor — State or non-State — in any type of armed conflict. The ICRC urges the handful of States that remain outside of chemical and biological weapons conventions to adhere to them without delay.

Current and recent armed conflicts — such as those in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Gaza — continue to expose the particularly devastating effects on civilians of heavy explosive weapons when used in populated areas. Large bombs and missiles, indirect-fire weapon systems, such as mortars, rockets and artillery, multi-barrel rocket launchers, and certain types of improvised explosive devices are prone to indiscriminate effects when used in population centres, owing to their wide-area effects. In addition to the high risk of incidental civilian death, injury and disability, heavy explosive weapons tend to cause extensive damage to critical civilian infrastructure, thereby triggering debilitating domino effects on

interconnected essential services such as health care and water and electricity supply systems. We continue to call on States and parties to armed conflict to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide-area impact in densely populated areas, owing to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects.

Finally, it is clear that the tremendous human suffering generated by brutal armed conflicts, notably in parts of the Middle East and Africa, is also a consequence of the flow of conventional arms to warring parties that completely disregard international humanitarian law. As the ICRC is witnessing on a daily basis in its field operations, irresponsible arms transfers are facilitating serious violations of international humanitarian law, including attacks against health care, acts of terrorism and sexual and gender-based violence. It is imperative that all States urgently fulfil their duty to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in their arms-transfer decisions. That duty underlies the transfer prohibitions and export assessments under the Arms Trade Treaty, which the ICRC urges all States to join and faithfully implement. Halting the supply of weapons to parties to armed conflicts that violate international humanitarian law will reduce human suffering and ultimately contribute to creating the conditions for regional and global security.

The Chair: As agreed at the organizational meeting of the Committee on 30 September (see A/C.1/71/PV.1), the Committee will now hear statements by the representatives of 24 non-governmental organizations. I request that speakers make their statements brief, and no longer than four minutes. In keeping with the Committee's established practice, I shall now suspend the meeting to enable us to continue in an informal setting.

The meeting was suspended at 3.15 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Programme of work

The Chair: The Committee has thus concluded the general debate segment of its work.

The next meeting of the First Committee will be held tomorrow, Thursday, 13 October, at 3 p.m. in this Conference Room to begin the second phase of its work, namely, the thematic debates — thematic discussion on specific subjects — and the introduction and consideration of all draft proposals submitted under the agenda items allocated to the Committee.

I remind members that the President of the General Assembly will address the Committee tomorrow. Summaries of the statements of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs and other high-level officials who will participate in tomorrow's exchange — on the theme "Current state of affairs in the field of arms control and disarmament and the role of international organizations with mandates in this field" — have been circulated in advance in an effort to stimulate an interactive discussion.

Let me also take this opportunity to remind all delegations that the deadline for the submission of draft resolutions and decisions to the Secretariat is tomorrow, Thursday, 13 October, at noon. Delegations are reminded that, regardless of the posting of proposals on the e-sponsorship website, main sponsors are required to formally submit their final texts to the Secretariat. That should be done before the deadline, in order to enable the Secretariat to process the documents in a timely manner, thereby expediting the collective work of the Committee.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.