Remarks by the Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs at the Parliamentary Meeting on Securing our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament

Mr. Thomas Makram
Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

New York
19 February 2020
Excellencies,
Distinguished parliamentarians,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, I wish to thank Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) for organizing this event. PNND has been one of the most consistent, creative and determined voices within the community in support of an active role for the United Nations in the field of disarmament.

Accordingly, we have been pleased to support the initiative for a parliamentary handbook in support of the implementation of the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Disarmament. As you may be aware, effective partnerships are so vital to the advancement of disarmament that it constitutes one of the four pillars of Securing Our Common Future.

We have also long regarded the role of parliamentarians as especially vital. This was made plain in the former Secretary-General’s letter in February 2010 to the Heads of Parliaments, in which he elaborated on why engagement by parliament is necessary for the success of disarmament and non-proliferation efforts.

Of particular note, he said “At a time when the international community is facing unprecedented global challenges, parliamentarians can take on leading roles in ensuring sustainable global security, while reducing the diversion of precious resources from human needs.”

This draws an important parallel to the precise reason why Secretary-General Antonio Guterres chose the moment that he did to launch his agenda for disarmament. It was, in fact, a direct response to the increasing danger of our present times, the return of major power competition, the changing and protracted nature of contemporary conflict, and the disintegration of international institutions for diffusing tensions and controlling arms.

Our answer to these new realities was to seek to place disarmament and non-proliferation back at the centre of the work of the United Nations.
The Secretary-General’s Disarmament Agenda is comprehensive but not exhaustive. It includes 40 actions, which focus foremost on practical measures that can be undertaken by UN entities in support of the efforts and initiatives of Member States. We developed the agenda through a process of multi-stakeholder dialogue, including consultations with interested governments and civil society.

The first part of the agenda is “Disarmament to save humanity.” It addresses weapons of mass destruction.

With respect to nuclear weapons, in response to the deteriorated security environment, our focus is on supporting practical measures to reduce risks and promote renewed dialogue, especially in the lead up to the 2020 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We hope to build upon areas where there is already considerable common ground between the nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States.

These include steps to reduce all types of nuclear weapons, ensure their non-use, reduce their role in security doctrines, reduce their operational readiness, constrain the development of advanced new types, increase transparency, and build mutual trust and confidence.

With respect to other weapons of mass destruction, our focus is on strengthening institutions to prevent any use of biological weapons, including by ensuring readiness to launch independent investigations and to ensure that an adequate response can be mounted in case prevention fails.

On preventing the emergence of new and destabilizing strategic weapons, we have been working to facilitate progress on preventing an arms race in outer space and on implementing transparency and confidence-building measures. We are also completed a study on the implications posed by hypersonic weapons.

The second part of the agenda is “Disarmament that saves lives”. It addresses the objectives of mitigating the humanitarian impact of conventional arms as well as excessive accumulation, insufficient regulation and illicit trade.
Our efforts in the area of humanitarian disarmament focus on mitigating the increasing urbanization of armed conflict, which has resulted in devastating and well-documented impacts on civilians. In this connection, we are supporting new efforts to rein in the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, through promoting common standards, the collection of data on collateral harm and the sharing of policy and practice.

We are also working to improve interagency coordination to better help governments address the scourge of improvised explosive devices.

Our other major focus on conventional arms is on integrating arms regulation into broader work for prevention and sustainable development. Toward this end, we are pursuing a new paradigm for supporting action at the country-level to end the illicit trade in small arms and their ammunition. Together with the Peacebuilding Support Office, we are establishing a new fund called SALIENT to facilitate a more effective and holistic approach.

The third pillar of the agenda is “Disarmament for future generations”. It addresses our need to remain vigilant in our understanding of new and emerging weapon technologies that could imperil peace and stability, result in civilian harm, or strain existing legal frameworks.

We are working to promote better understanding and awareness of the implications posed by developments in science and technology and their application to weapons. This will include facilitating efforts to encourage responsible innovation by industry, engineers and scientists as well as facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue.

We are seeking ways to promote the sharing of practice, experiences and outcomes of new weapon reviews conducted by States in accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

We are working to promote a culture of accountability and adherence to norms, rules and principles for responsible behaviour in cyberspace.

And, in the face of growing autonomy in weaponry, we are actively supporting the development new measures need to ensure humans always maintain control over the use of force.
Progress in how we are implementing the Agenda is tracked through a dedicated website, which features our implementation plan. As the agenda was not mandated by the General Assembly or Security Council, we were able to dispense with a static, formal report. Instead, we created a dynamic web-based platform for monitoring and tracking the real-time status of various steps and activities.

The website currently monitors the status of 121 activities under the implementation plan, as well as 16 unique activities related to the Sustainable Development Goals, for a total of 137. We have registered progress in three-quarters of actions since we launched the implementation plan in October 2018.

The response from Member States has been largely positive. A total of 22 States and one regional organization have stepped forward as Champions or Supporters for various actions across all four pillars of the Agenda. These champions and supporters have committed to financially support, or politically support in a leadership capacity, activities in connection with the agenda.

This is just brief overview of the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Disarmament and what we are doing to implement it. We sincerely appreciate your interest and engagement. And we look forward to deepening partnerships with parliaments in the months and years ahead toward achieving our shared objectives in the field of disarmament.

Thank you.