Statement by
Ambassador Piet de Klerk
Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
Chairman of the 2008 session of the UNDC

on

Thematic discussion on the issue of
Disarmament Machinery

at

The First Committee
of the 63rd UN General Assembly

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First Committee, Thematic Debate on "Disarmament Machinery. 23 October 2008: Ambassador Piet de Klerk, Chairman of the 2008 Session of the UNDC

Distinguished delegates,

It is a particular pleasure to take part in this discussion of the UN disarmament machinery. I will focus on the UN Disarmament Commission, but I will also make some broader remarks. Views about the UNDC differ greatly. During the 2008 UNDC session quite a number of delegations stressed the usefulness of the UNDC, while it is no secret that some others would rather pull the plug.

With the last category I agree that it is indeed difficult to avoid the impression that the UN disarmament machinery in general, and the UN Disarmament Commission in particular, is not in very good shape.

Since its substantive session in 1999, the UNDC's work has been marked by the same paralysis that has been seen in other multilateral disarmament fora during the last decade. It has made no substantial recommendations since 1999, and from 2003 to 2005 it even struggled to agree on an agenda.

Without a substantive result, the outcome of the 2006–2008 cycle added to the Commission's unsatisfactory record in recent years. That is why, in closing the 2008 session I referred to 'nearly a decade of disarray' in describing the years after 1999.

Yet, I don't agree with those who say the UNDC should be discontinued, and I will tell you why:

Since its establishment in its current form in 1978, the Disarmament Commission has a respectable track record of unanimously adopted principles, guidelines and recommendations on disarmament. Examples are: the catalogue of confidence building measures adopted in 1986 and 1987, the set of verification principles agreed upon by consensus in 1988 and the recommendations on establishing nuclear weapon free zones adopted in 1999.

To rid the world of weapons of mass destruction, to strive for considerably lower levels of conventional armaments, to abolish particularly cruel weapons and to stave off destabilizing weapon developments is a gargantuan task. It requires the efforts of many: politicians, diplomats, experts that provide advice, on their own or as part of think tanks or blue ribbon commissions, well informed NGOs, popular movements, all working together in different configurations. In this complex environment the role of the UNDC has been, and will continue to be a modest one. In the first place the UNDC is a deliberative body, that has to come up with recommendations. It is not a forum for negotiating disarmament measures. In the second place: the UNDC traditionally works by consensus. That is a valuable tradition, because substantial disarmament matters are matters of great sensitivity that are directly related to security and stability of all participating states – that is all 192 UN member states.
Thirdly: while matters of security and stability are best looked at in a holistic and comprehensive way, practical considerations dictate that the agenda items that can be dealt with in a successful way need to be focused and limited in scope.

So, in my view the role of UNDC within the totality of disarmament efforts is modest, but important (potentially important) at the same time. It is a forum where States can present their views, which is important in itself, even though in that respect the UNDC does not have an added value compared to the First Committee. The added value might be the focused attention to particular areas where win-win situations can be created. In the past the work of the UNDC has been to study disarmament areas for which we now have created Groups of Governmental Experts. Obviously some restraint is required to do the same work in UNDC as in the much smaller GGEs, but on the other hand it would be a much more inclusive process. In my view the UNDC needs to return to considering such more limited agenda items.

As a UN forum the UNDC is and will continue to be an intergovernmental forum, but in my view the importance of the UNDC would increase, if it would decide to let the outside world -- the non-governmental part -- in. During the last meeting, this spring, an effort was made to start inviting some experts, not governmental experts, but experts from the wider UN family, for example, the IAEA, CTBTO or UNIDIR, to take part in some of the plenary meetings. Despite an encouragement form this august body, the First Committee and subsequently the General Assembly (res 61/98), UNDC was not ready to take such a decision. In my view such greater participation from the outside would add to the value of the UNDC’s contribution to the disarmament debate. Many disarmament efforts are ongoing outside of the UN and it would be wise in my view for the UNDC to at least be cognizant of these efforts. Of course: the modalities of participation need to be worked out, but that should be no problem once there is agreement on the principle of broader participation.

Let me make a few remarks about the UNDC session this spring against the background of my earlier remarks. The UNDC discussed two main issues: “Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons”; and “Practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional arms”.

As you know, the Commission’s efforts to promote guidelines or to formulate recommendations regarding nuclear issues or conventional weapons were unsuccessful.

The outcome of 2008 session essentially mirrored that of the previous sessions in 2006 and 2007 -- Working Group I actively engaged in a substantive debate on a wide range of issues. It appeared that the Commission was divided into two camps, namely, one favoring a stronger emphasis on nuclear non-proliferation measures and the other calling for greater and more transparent nuclear disarmament efforts. However, these are not antagonistic positions. Most participating delegations agree that measures in both fields are necessary. The positions differ in the relative weight that is accorded
to both fields. To me the main conclusion is that Working Group I dealt with a number of draft recommendations which were all sensitive, and because of their multitude could not be discussed thoroughly.

Similarly, in spite of the recognition of the UN’s contribution to enhancing the effectiveness of confidence building measures (CBMs) by for instance promoting complementarities between sub-regional, regional and global approaches, Working Group II remained unable to reach consensus, although with some good will from all sides agreement might have been in reach.

Mr. Chairman,

It is our responsibility, more than ever, not to miss the opportunity to strengthen the disarmament machinery to effectively deal with new emerging threats and challenges. It is therefore all the more important to revitalize and reaffirm the deliberative function of the Disarmament Commission and I call on the members of the Commission to contemplate its future in a spirit of compromise and accommodation.

This is closely connected to the need for ideas and leadership that can help reinvigorate the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda as well as its methods of work. Even more importantly so: we need to rise to the challenges we are currently facing. I believe we can do that if we focus our attention on particular areas where win-win situations can be created.

Progress, as incremental as it may be, would show to the world that the UN’s disarmament machinery can still function smoothly and create the conditions for peace and disarmament.

I hope that the UNDC will be able to move forward and bring to a successful end its deliberations at the next cycle, so as to demonstrate its continuing potential as an important and vital forum for the discussion of disarmament issues.