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Statement by
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in

Thematic Debate of the First Committee
On Disarmament Machinery
The 64th session of the UN General Assembly

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First Committee Thematic Debate on "Disarmament Machinery"
Statement by Amb. A. Towpik, Chairman of the 2009 session of UNDC
22 October 2009

Mr. Chairman,

The new political environment is becoming more conducive to disarmament efforts. We hope it will lead to political decisions which are a decisive factor for the success of those efforts. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to reflect also on an "appropriate international machinery" for disarmament efforts and on how we can use this machinery in an effective way.

That is why I welcome this discussion on the UN disarmament machinery and I appreciate the opportunity to take part in it.

I am speaking in my capacity as the Chairman of the United Nations Disarmament Commission and I will limit my comments only to issues directly related to this body. My intention is to discuss briefly

a) firstly, the last session of the Commission – both its results and the discussion we had on the future work of this body and

b) secondly, a possible role of the UN Disarmament Commission in a new political environment and in particular a special role which the Commission can play during its next session in April 2010.

Let me start with reminding that the UN Disarmament Commission was established as a specialized, deliberative body for the United Nations multilateral disarmament debates. Every year it provides a forum for focused deliberation of two or three specific items, agreed and adopted as a substantive agenda. Usually these items include one on nuclear weapons and one on conventional arms. The goal is to achieve consensus on recommendations how to strengthen or create disarmament norms. The recommendations are to be submitted to the UN General Assembly.

The Commission in its present form has been working since 1978. The results of its work varied from session to session. Between 1978 and 1999 it was able to agree on a number of principles, guidelines and recommendations on disarmament. They included i. a. the catalogue of confidence building measures adopted in 1986 and 1987, the set of verification principles adopted in 1988 as well as recommendations related to nuclear weapon free zones adopted in 1999.
Last decade has, however, passed without any progress. Since its session in 1999 the UNDC's work has been marked by the same paralysis that has been seen in other multilateral disarmament fora at that time. As a result no recommendations have been adopted since 1999 and in the period 2003 – 2004 the Commission was not able even to agree on the substantive agenda of its sessions.

The last session of the Commission held in April this year has brought mixed results. We faced some old time problems but also we watched some new, positive developments.

The main task of the session, as directed by the General Assembly in its resolution 61/67 was “to prepare elements of a draft declaration of 2010s as the fourth disarmament decade and to submit them for consideration by the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session”. Unfortunately, the Commission was not able to agree on such a draft declaration.

On the other hand, however, my feeling is that we have prepared good ground for the work of the Commission next year.

First, we agreed on the substantive agenda for the whole 3 year cycle of the work of the Commission, of which 2009 was the first.

Second, we elected very good, extremely competent and devoted chairpersons of two Working Groups - our colleagues from Italy and South Africa. They will lead deliberations of the groups during the next sessions.

Third, working Group I of the Commission dealing with the “Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons” conducted very good discussions. It was a valuable review of present positions on various issues connected with this problem.

Fourth, working Group II dealing with the “Elements of a draft declaration of 2010s as the fourth disarmament decade” also had an extensive discussion. This discussion together with the “nonpaper” presented by the Chair of the Group could be of significant help in finding a way forward next year.

Fifth and last, but not least, a new and good atmosphere was established in the Commission – both during our informal consultations before the session and during the session. Mutual respect and understanding is a good basis for further work.

To this rather formal report on the results of the last session let me add two additional remarks related rather to the informal consultations we had.

One is connected with the discussion on the implementation of the General Assembly resolution 61/98. This resolution contains the following recommendation: “The Commission is encouraged to invite, as appropriate, experts on disarmament... for discussions at plenary meetings.” The question of implementation of this recommendation was discussed during the 2008 and 2009 sessions of the Commission. Despite the efforts of my predecessor Ambassador Piet de Klerk last year, and the efforts undertaken this year we have not been able to find an agreement on this issue. I do believe, however, that the idea of inviting eminent experts to contribute to the work of the Disarmament Commission deserves further consideration.
It seems valid especially now. Numerous initiatives have been put forward by many politicians, eminent intellectuals, experts and independent research centers in the USA, Europe, Australia and Asia. It would be good if the Commission could become a channel between the UN and outside world through which some of those ideas and initiatives could be introduced into UN machinery where they could become the subject of further consideration. It could help in our search for compromise on a number of important questions and in better understanding the nature of obstacles in the implementation of disarmament measures.

The UN Disarmament Commission was established as the only UN deliberative body in the field of disarmament. Its function is to consider and make recommendations on various issues of disarmament. The Commission working as a deliberative body is expected to stimulate discussion, seek new ideas and indicate new possible approaches. I believe that the participation of experts - in an agreed form and scope - can serve this purpose and can make the work of the Commission richer and more interesting. The Commission could become a real center of reflection on disarmament issues.

My second remark is that the Commission needs periodical critical self-assessment and - if found necessary - improvement and adjustment of its methods of work. Nothing in the world is perfect and it applies also to the Commission. I think that next year, the Commission may wish to devote one of its meetings to reflection on its methods of work.

I hope that these two ideas, which were discussed during the last session of the Commission - inviting special guests to selected meetings of the Commission and periodical reflection on the methods of its work - will be considered again during the next sessions of the Commission.

Mr. Chairman,

The role of UNDC within the UN disarmament machinery is rather modest. And in fact, its role has not been often mentioned in the debate of the I Committee. Nevertheless the UNDC should not be neglected. It is universal deliberative body composed of all UN member states, including also those who are not members of UN negotiating bodies. The Commission is comprised of nuclear and nonnuclear countries. It includes those who are parties to already established arms control regimes such as nonproliferation of nuclear weapons or elimination of chemical or biological weapons and those who have not yet joined these regimes. All these states can present their views and ideas in this body. It is also a forum where - instead of a general debate on disarmament - states are expected to focus their attention on agreed particular areas, deserving special attention.

This leads me to another thought. A new political environment is developing for disarmament discussions. Many dividing lines are starting to disappear. The expectation for new bold initiatives is growing. The need to review and if necessary to revisit our approaches in the disarmament field is widely felt.
The UN Disarmament Commission can play a very useful role in these new conditions. In particular, we should reflect what could be the role of the next session of the Commission in April 2010, just before the NPT Review Conference.

In April 2010 time maybe more ripe than today to discuss and undertake new conceptual approaches in the field of nuclear weapons and to elaborate a long-term vision of disarmament efforts. We will see better, whether and how we can break the present stalemate.

Two agenda items of the Commission agreed this year namely “achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation of nuclear weapons” as well as on “a draft declaration of 2010’s as the fourth disarmament decade” create a particularly suitable context for new thoughts and ideas. The discussion will be conducted not only in a new atmosphere but will take into account new developments which - we all hope - will take place next year.

In particular the next session of the DC can play an important role in the preparation of the May NPT Review Conference.

On the one hand, everything should be done to avoid any negative impact of its deliberations on the NPT Review Conference. We will need a spirit of mutual good will and shared responsibility not to cause any harm to the approaching Conference on NPT which is one of the cornerstones of global security.

On the other hand, the session can become an additional forum for the presentation of new ideas and views which could be conducive to the positive outcome of the NPT Review Conference.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, our hopes and expectations related to the UNDC must remain realistic. The next session of the UNDC will not change the whole picture; it will not replace intensive consultations before the NPT Review Conference; it will not deliver new solutions. But I humbly suggest it can create opportunities which should be taken into account. In any case, the next UN Disarmament Commission session to be held in April 2010 should not be approached in a routine way. It deserves special attention.