First Committee: General debate

8 October 2012

Statement by HE Gary Quinlan, Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations

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Mr Chairman,

I congratulate you on your election. Australia is pleased to see you chairing this important Committee. Indonesia has exemplary credentials in disarmament and international security and your personal contribution is widely acknowledged. You can be assured of the Australian delegation’s support for your efforts as Chair. And allow me to begin by commending Indonesia’s leadership in ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty this year, which has breathed new life into our collective efforts to consolidate a crucial pillar of the nuclear disarmament regime.

Mr Chairman,

Within Australia’s broad commitment to the multilateral system, we have always placed disarmament and non-proliferation at the top of our agenda – for the simple reason that it is fundamental to global peace and security. We have always been willing to do our share of the work and to try new things to ensure we retain our collective ambition; to ensure we continue to lift our game in our efforts to make the world more stable and secure, and ultimately save lives.

I want to focus Australia’s comments today on a few priority areas that require our urgent action.

The first is the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime – the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We must take credible and definite steps to address the fact that the nuclear weapons that are still in existence have the combined destructive power of over 150,000 Hiroshima bombs.

At the first Preparatory Committee meeting in Vienna in May, which Australia was honoured to Chair, States parties rightly came and reported on what they had done to implement the 2010 NPT RevCon consensus Action Plan. This enabled us to collectively
acknowledge that we are in fact on track. Importantly, States pledged to stay the course on some of the most challenging elements of the Action Plan where progress is essential – such as concrete reductions in nuclear arsenals, strengthening adherence to Additional Protocol and the holding of the Middle East conference in 2012.

This was a solid, early outcome for the new review cycle, but we must not be complacent. Clearly the greatest effort lies ahead of us.

Expectations rightly fall most heavily on the nuclear-weapon States – particularly on reporting their Action 5 nuclear disarmament commitments by the 2014 PrepCom meeting. And to this end, Australia and the other members of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative have sought to push this agenda ahead by engaging the nuclear-weapon States directly on transparency and reporting. A stronger culture of transparency – and accountability – among the nuclear-weapon States and indeed other States with nuclear weapons, is indispensable to making honest progress towards nuclear disarmament.

Entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty must remain our priority. We should never forget that the current moratorium against nuclear tests is incredibly fragile and we at any moment we could easily slide back into a time of nuclear tests and improvement. This is not what any of us want and we must all take the necessary steps to prevent it. Last month, Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr joined six of his colleagues in co-hosting a Ministerial Meeting at which we committed to a strong statement of support and expectation of the CTBT’s entry into force. Australia calls on the nuclear weapon possessors and other Annex II countries that have not ratified to look again seriously at doing so.

At this First Committee, Australia with Mexico and New Zealand will present our annual CTBT resolution. We invite all Member States to support and co-sponsor this year’s resolution which reinforces the need, pending entry into force, for maintaining a testing moratorium. This gives renewed expression to the Treaty’s central obligation and proposition: that nuclear-weapon test explosions and other nuclear explosions should never occur again.

We must remember that the CTBT is more than just a practical commitment not to test nuclear weapons; it is symbolic of a broader undertaking to prevent the further development of nuclear weapons, and thereby says much about our commitment to nuclear disarmament.

At the same time as halting the further development of nuclear weapons, we must also reverse the quantity of them. The start of negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament on a treaty banning production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and other nuclear explosive devices is long overdue. The need for such a measure, which is essential to achieving a world without nuclear weapons, has long been recognised by the General Assembly, including in the Final Document of SSOD I in 1978 and most recently in three resolutions of UNGA 66.

There are clearly gaps in our global disarmament and non-proliferation regime; we acknowledge them and much of our effort is aimed at addressing them. But this also
means regional initiatives are a crucial complementary focus; they can strengthen global efforts, but they can also address specific regional concerns and insecurities. Nowhere is this more relevant, and urgent, than in the Middle East. Australia strongly supports the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, and on-going efforts to convene a conference in 2012. We call upon all States in the Middle East to engage in a spirit of genuine and constructive cooperation to make this happen.

Mr Chairman,

As gains are made in disarmament and non-proliferation, we face a situation where new challenges move ahead of us, and have the potential to create new tension, for example in cyberspace. The new Group of Governmental Experts on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security is an important opportunity to build consensus on norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviour by States; and on measures to develop trust and confidence between States in cyberspace, thereby enhancing international security. The need for this will only increase with our dependence on information and communications technologies, which is why Australia nominated to chair the Group. We are honoured to take on this role and are committed to a constructive outcome that improves our collective capacity to deal with this threat head-on, while at the same time ensuring that developing countries have enhanced access to the technologies they need.

We are also pleased to support the Republic of Korea again in its presentation of the resolution “preventing and combating illicit brokering” which cuts across the fields of WMD and conventional-weapon proliferation; we seek strong support again for this resolution. Brokering must not be allowed to provide a loophole for all the good efforts and progress that States make in prohibiting the illegal spread of arms.

Mr Chairman,

We are all only too aware that armed violence, fuelled by the availability of illicit conventional arms, fractures societies, displaces populations and undermines development. We see it around the world. We see it now - 2,000 people a day killed because of illegally and irresponsibly traded weapons - mostly small arms - and the impact is greatest on women and children.

Since 2006, Australia has joined six other Member States – the co-authors – to support and guide a process within the United Nations towards a legally binding instrument on the highest possible common international standards for the international transfer of conventional arms.

At the United Nations Conference for an Arms Trade Treaty in New York in July, States came close to achieving a treaty that would genuinely reduce this threat. We failed to adopt a treaty at that conference, but we are almost there. On the final day, as only a handful of States asked for more time, over 90 States from all regions joined together in a statement delivered by Mexico and delivered a clear intent to finish the job.
So at this First Committee, the seven co-authors are presenting a simple resolution to reconvene negotiations one more time to agree a treaty, and to urge that we use the 26 July text as our starting point. We must not lose the progress we made, nor the momentum. Make no mistake, Australia will work to improve that text to ensure we get the strongest and most effective Treaty.

We hope that the ATT resolution will enjoy the strong support of the General Assembly so that we can finish the work of agreeing on the Arms Trade Treaty and get on with the even more important work of implementing it effectively.

Australia has already pledged $1 million to initiate a multilateral assistance fund to help developing countries with implementation.

Australia will provide further support to those wishing to participate in the final conference – our principle has always been that all States should be at the table in these negotiations. Strong participation from regions most affected by this senseless trade and killing – including Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and our own region the Pacific – is crucial to achieving a treaty that makes a difference on the ground.

Mr Chairman,

As we saw at the Review Conference on the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the UN membership universally wants action to prevent small arms from taking more lives. The political will exists to achieve strong consensus outcomes to that end. We thank Ambassador Joy Ogwu for guiding us to that outcome and capturing our collective commitment to a framework of measures that will hold us all to account on this problem. Again, implementation must now be our focus.

Mr Chairman,

Australia looks forward to setting out in greater detail during the coming few weeks our views, our ideas and more importantly the practical action we are taking on a range of disarmament issues. This includes our other efforts in the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative and our on-going work in assisting partners to rehabilitate land and lives through our $100 million Mine Action Strategy.

And throughout this session under your leadership, Mr Chairman, I hope that our collective focus can be on what multilateralism at its best can achieve – practical outcomes for the benefit of the international community and, at the end of the day, humanity.