STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA ON THE DISARMAMENT MACHINERY DURING THE THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 2013 UN FIRST COMMITTEE

23 October 2013

Chairperson,

Since we last met, the disarmament arena has seen some breakthrough with the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in the General Assembly. Unfortunately, beyond this achievement, the disarmament machinery established under the First Special Session of the General Assembly on Disarmament in 1978 remains stagnant.

Of particular concern to my delegation is the continuing stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). The prolonged impasse in this negotiating forum not only undermines its credibility as the world’s single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum, but also raises questions about its continued relevance. It is imperative that the work of the CD be revitalized so that it can again discharge its mandate through the resumption of substantive work. As part of this process, we have exercised the greatest level of flexibility and supported proposals that stop far short of what we would deem optimum solutions. We did so on the understanding that such deliberations may pave the way for eventual negotiations.

We commend all the Presidents of the 2013 CD Session for their respective efforts to develop a programme of work. We also wish to thank the Secretary-General of the CD for his innovative proposals to revitalize the CD so as to turn the tide. In particular, we welcome the establishment of the informal Working Group to develop a programme of work in accordance with CD/1956. We are well aware of the fact that some may have supported the informal Working Group’s establishment with the aim of creating the illusion of some movement in the CD. Our support for the proposal was informed by our desire to explore all avenues aimed at the development of a programme of work that is ‘robust in substance and progressive over time’. We will continue to do so during the coming year.

Chairperson,

With each passing year, it has become clearer that the vast majority of UN Member States are exasperated with the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. In March 2013, more than 120 countries met in Oslo, Norway for the Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. Earlier this week, South Africa was amongst the over 120 countries that aligned themselves with a Joint Statement delivered by New Zealand to the First Committee on the humanitarian impact of
nuclear weapons. UN Member States actively participated in the Open Ended Working Group to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, and the General Assembly recently held a successful High Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament. The successful outcomes of the High Level Meeting and the Open Ended Working Group demonstrate what is indeed possible.

They provided the opportunity to move away from the disagreements that sometimes define other fora, towards the fuller consideration of the elements that will be required to achieve and maintain our shared commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free world. Rather than serving as a so-called distraction, these initiatives aimed to strengthen the work of the multilateral fora as mandated by the UN General Assembly. Negotiations are essential if we are to strengthen the international rule of law, which is key to promoting peace and security, where all countries – developing and developed – are able to play by the same rules. Such negotiations are vital if we are to achieve the requisite progress on nuclear disarmament that the world community seeks.

Chairperson,

In 2011, South Africa, together with the Netherlands and Switzerland put forward a resolution aimed at the revitalisation of the multilateral disarmament machinery. This resolution, 66/66, was adopted by consensus and resolved to explore, consider and consolidate options, proposals and elements for revitalising the UN disarmament machinery, including the CD. We therefore welcome the various initiatives launched during the past year. With further activities planned for 2014, South Africa remains optimistic that solutions can be found and that multilateral governance and the international rule of law in the area of disarmament would be strengthened.

South Africa will remain actively and constructively engaged in the CD and other multilateral disarmament fora with a view to seeking solutions.

In concluding, Chairperson,

My delegation wishes to recognise the important role and contribution of civil society in the field of disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. It is our hope that interaction between governments, members of civil society and academia could be further enhanced so that we can all benefit from the variety of insights and ideas presented by the different constituencies.

I thank you.