STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE THEMATIC DEBATE ON THE DISARMAMENT MACHINERY

27 October 2015

Chairperson,

We welcome advances made during the past year in strengthening the international rule of law in the multilateral disarmament and international security environment. Regrettably, the progress achieved in the conventional weapons environment and on chemical weapons have not been matched in the area of nuclear disarmament. Of particular concern to South Africa is the continuing impasse in the UN disarmament machinery established under the First Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to Disarmament in 1978. The prolonged stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and the lack of agreement in the UN Disarmament Commission (UNDC) are impacting negatively on the multilateral system. These bodies must be allowed to discharge their respective mandates in order to remain relevant.

Chairperson,

My delegation is disappointed that the UN Disarmament Commission’s Substantive Session for 2015 ended with no conclusions being adopted in April this year. This is unfortunately symptomatic of the stalemate that has marked the UNDC’s deliberations for over a decade. On the issue of the two main agenda items relating to nuclear weapons and conventional weapons, no progress was made, given the lack of agreement on these issues. That said, there is still reason to believe that we can achieve the progress needed in order for the UNDC to make a set of concrete recommendations to the General Assembly during this 2015-2017 cycle, provided each State demonstrates the requisite political will.

While there was also some discussion on the inclusion of a third item on the agenda during the 2015 Substantive Session, it is not clear if the inclusion of such a third item will not further hamper progress on the UNDC’s agenda. Nonetheless, my delegation is open to further informal consultations on this proposal. South Africa will continue to strive, together with other delegations, to achieve tangible progress during the next Substantive Session of the UNDC during the 70th session of the General Assembly.

Chairperson,

Of particular concern to my delegation is the 19-year stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). At the heart of the problem lies the continued resistance by a small number of States to implement their disarmament obligations and to subject themselves to the international rule of law. As a country committed to the resumption of substantive work in the CD, we have exercised the greatest level of flexibility and again decided not to oppose proposals that stop far short of what we would deem optimum solutions.

South Africa commends all the Presidents of the 2015 CD Session for their efforts to develop a Programme of Work (PoW). However, we are disappointed that the CD could again not reach consensus so as to resume substantive work. Over the years, South Africa had been participating in the informal discussions in accordance with a Schedule of Activities and for the last few years in the Informal Working Group to develop a Programme of Work. We did so, because we were hopeful that these informal discussions may help us to move beyond the continued deadlock. Regrettably, this has not been the case, as some have seemingly supported these efforts with the aim of creating the illusion of progress in the CD. While we continued to refrain from blocking consensus on these decisions, this year, South Africa saw no benefit in participating in these repetitive activities that have once again produced no substantive outcome.
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 April 2015, 160 countries aligned themselves with a Joint Statement delivered by Austria to the 2015 NPT Review Conference. In December 2014, 158 countries met in Vienna, Austria for the third Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, which stressed amongst others, the importance of presenting the fact-based discussions, findings and compelling evidence on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons to all relevant fora and in the UN framework, as they should be at the centre of all deliberations and the implementation of obligations and commitments on nuclear disarmament.

In 2013, Member States actively participated in the Open Ended Working Group to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, and the General Assembly convened a successful High Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament. The outcomes of the High Level Meeting and the Open Ended Working Group demonstrated what is indeed possible. They also 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 injected new energy into the work of the multilateral fora.

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 2016, South Africa believes that solutions can be found and that multilateral governance and the international rule of law in the area of disarmament could be strengthened. We therefore remain ready to consider any proposals that would genuinely assist in breaking the impasse in the CD. However, if the Conference continues to fail in executing its mandate, it may be necessary to consider suspending the work of the CD until agreement can be reached on the commencement of negotiations or to consider other options in taking forward the important work that this body has been entrusted with. Negotiations are essential if we are to strengthen the international rule of law, which is key to promoting peace and security, where all countries 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. South Africa will remain actively and constructively engaged in the CD and other multilateral disarmament fora with a view to seeking solutions.

In conclusion, Chairperson,

My delegation wishes to recognise the important role and contribution of civil society in the field of disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. In this context, we welcome the informal CD - Civil Society Forum that was held in March 2015 in Geneva. 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.