Message by Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva
Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and Personal
Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Conference

First Committee of the General Assembly
“Exchange with the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs and
other High Level Officials in the Field of Arms Control and
Disarmament”

Thursday, 17 October 2013 at 15:00

Delivered on the Director-General’s behalf by Mr. Jarmo Sareva,
Deputy Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and
Director of UNODA Geneva

Mr. Chairman
Madam High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
Distinguished Panellists
Distinguished Delegates

While I am not able to join you in person, I should like, first of all, to thank the Chairman and the Bureau for the kind invitation to address the First Committee of the General Assembly. As I now prepare to leave the United Nations and the Conference on Disarmament to take up new responsibilities in my home country, I appreciate this opportunity to thank all Member States for the support extended to me in my role as Secretary-General of the
Conference on Disarmament, and to share with you my thoughts on the state of affairs in multilateral disarmament.

The First Committee constitutes one of the key pillars of the United Nations disarmament machinery and of multilateral diplomacy more broadly. The legislative functions of this body have proven to be solid measures and norms for the promotion of disarmament and international security in the service of a better world for all.

Today, I will focus my statement on the Conference on Disarmament – another central pillar of the disarmament machinery. As Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Conference, I continue to firmly believe that this unique body is irreplaceable as the single standing multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community.

The Conference on Disarmament has a critical part to play in ensuring that the rule of law is mainstreamed in disarmament. As an example, an important area where the rule of law has been mainstreamed is chemical weapons, where the Conference successfully negotiated a Convention.

Today, as the tragic case of chemical weapons usage in Syria shows, the rule of law in disarmament is an indispensable foundation for the collective efforts to save humanity from conflict and its deadly effects.
I take this opportunity to congratulate the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons which has won the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize for its most valuable and highly respected work in promoting the ban on chemical weapons. The award of the Prize is also a reminder to all of us that the importance of disarmament is recognized and disarmament efforts are respected.

Strengthening of the rule of law in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation is urgently needed. Since the adoption of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty in 1996, no legally binding instrument has been negotiated by the Conference on Disarmament. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said last month during the High-Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament, it is time for new binding legal commitments to be adopted and “this should begin with revitalizing the disarmament machinery, particularly the Conference on Disarmament.”

While consensus is achieved every year on the CD agenda and the four core issues – a fissile material cut-off treaty; nuclear disarmament; the prevention of an arms race in outer space; and an effective international arrangement to assure non-nuclear weapon States against the threat or use of nuclear weapons – the membership has not yet established the political consensus necessary to launch substantive negotiations on these vital issues.
Many of you have called upon the Conference on Disarmament, time and again, to begin negotiations for the conclusion of a fissile material cut-off treaty as a first step in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. I agree that this would be a logical first step.

When I addressed this Committee last year, I spoke of my conviction that the dynamics in the Conference on Disarmament can change. This year, there are grounds for cautious optimism that change could be nurtured: The 2013 CD Session which has just ended has shown intensified efforts by the membership in the search of an end to the protracted deadlock. Four out of six presidencies have formulated draft Programmes of Work which, though not adopted, have attested to a renewed vibrancy.

While all Members of the Conference agree that a balanced and comprehensive Programme of Work with a negotiating mandate on all substantive agenda items is the goal to attain, some have suggested that a “light” or “simplified” Programme of Work with a discussion mandate be adopted pending political consensus on negotiation processes of the agenda items. Others have drawn attention to the need to review the methods of the work of the Conference. Some also believe that the membership of the CD should be expanded and that time has come to overhaul the entire disarmament machinery. Many have called for a Fourth Special Session on Disarmament.
It was against this backdrop that in June in my capacity as Secretary-General of the CD and Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, I made a number of proposals for a structured and action-oriented process that could lead to more positive changes in the Conference:

First, the establishment of an Informal Working Group with a mandate to produce a Programme of Work that would be robust in substance and progressive over time in its implementation.  
Second, the establishment of a subsidiary body in accordance with article 23 of the Rules of Procedure of the CD, to examine and make proposals on the improvement of the working methods of the Conference.  
Third, the designation of a special coordinator to examine and make proposals on the expansion of the membership of the Conference and on the possible role that civil society may play in its work.

I am pleased that in August, drawing from one of these proposals, the Conference decided to establish an Informal Working Group to produce a Programme of Work, and I thank the membership for the trust placed in my suggestion. The Informal Working Group has now begun its work, co-chaired by Ambassador Luis Gallegos of Ecuador and Ambassador Peter Woolcott of Australia.
I believe that the Informal Working Group will make a valuable complement to the efforts of the President of the Conference. It can be a step in the right direction and help reinforce the President’s work. Importantly, it can help to lay the foundation for a new shared understanding of how the Conference on Disarmament can resume substantive work.

I have had the opportunity of emphasizing that the Programme of Work should be solid, by building on the collective will of the membership of the Conference. It also needs to be comprehensive by drawing from among several, if not all, items on the agenda.

The Informal Working Group is a new approach to the business of the Conference on Disarmament and should not become a diversion from substantive work and a reiteration of well-known positions.

While we work towards the realignment of the political priorities which would allow for negotiations to start in the Conference, the Informal Working Group can produce a Programme of Work providing a basis for such negotiations to hit the ground running.

It is therefore important that the Group be given the opportunity to continue its work next year. The on-going inter-sessional period can be used productively in support of the Conference. In this context, I have encouraged the Co-chair and the Vice Co-chair to continue their work after the First Committee session and convene open-ended
informal consultations among members and observers of the Conference, with the close involvement of the outgoing and incoming Presidents. I believe this would help to maintain the momentum as we approach 2014.

The 2013 Session ended on a note of optimism. The next session which starts in January 2014 should build on this optimism and allow the Conference on Disarmament to resume its negotiating mandate. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stressed, another year of stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament would simply be unacceptable.

It has been an honour to work with you in support of our shared goal of disarmament. I am a fervent believer in the enduring value and importance of multilateral disarmament, not least in the area of weapons of mass destruction. It is only through compromise and consensus that we can craft sustainable solutions and eliminate weapons of mass destruction. It is an opportunity for the international community – and a responsibility. We need to take that responsibility seriously – also in the Conference on Disarmament.

You may continue to rely on my firm commitment to multilateral disarmament, just as the world relies on our collective commitment to this cause of a more secure world. I thank you and wish you fruitful deliberations.