Chairman’s Summary
Informal Conference on Disarmament Civil Society Forum
19 March 2015

As a pilot and the first of its kind, the one-day Informal Conference on Disarmament Civil Society Forum formed part of the efforts of the Acting Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Conference to facilitate initiatives that could help address the impasse in the Conference.

In a video message to the Forum, the Secretary-General of the United Nations stressed how civil society had been a catalyst for action on disarmament and arms control, and underlined how in the light of the CD’s 19-year impasse, fresh approaches were needed. The Forum provided an opportunity to explore ways to break the impasse.

On panel one that dealt with nuclear disarmament, while there was overwhelming agreement on the elimination of nuclear weapons, some States, particularly the nuclear-weapon States (NWS), differed on the approaches and timing of achieving this objective. There were also divergent views on the value of deterrence. On the one hand, nuclear deterrence was seen as ineffective in preventing numerous conflicts. On the other, it was justified in ensuring national security. Claims that nuclear weapons provided security were countered by concerns that, if nuclear weapons were seen as valuable for national security, other states would want to have nuclear arsenals. Attention was drawn to the ‘legal gap’ in relation to nuclear weapons by comparison with regimes covering biological and chemical weapons, and as a possible unifying factor in collectively discussing the identification of means of closing the gap. Points were raised about various possible mechanisms for attaining nuclear disarmament, including the ‘step-by-step’ and comprehensive approaches, NPT review conferences, or smaller groups of like-minded States, and the usefulness of timelines for nuclear disarmament. Attention was drawn to progress made in reaching bilateral agreements on nuclear disarmament, and there was also the view that unilateral and bilateral efforts did not remove the need for progress in the multilateral sphere. The growing international momentum on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons was perceived by many as a valid argument for nuclear disarmament. The need for transparency in nuclear disarmament efforts was raised as being an integral part of the nuclear disarmament process and some suggested that confidence-building measures were needed not just among the NWS but also between the NWS and non-nuclear-weapon States.

The second panel explored prospects for a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. While progress on the issue of prohibiting the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons has been lacking in recent years, establishing a ceiling on fissile material was seen as all the more desirable in a climate of international insecurity. Momentum was seen as increasing with the work of the Group of Governmental Experts on a fissile material cut-off treaty and with an imminent treaty proposal by France. Existing moratoria on fissile material production should not be seen as reducing the need for a fissile material treaty. The amount of separated plutonium has been steadily increasing and the amount of highly-enriched uranium will start to increase again, as the programmes to eliminate this material have come to an end or slowed down. Regarding the issue of pre-existing stockpiles, the divergence of views should not, as stated in the Shannon Mandate, preclude discussion of the issue during negotiations. Like-minded States could develop self-contained verification projects to have answers ready on technical means of verifying production controls for when prohibition negotiations begin. Many expressed the view that the CD was the appropriate venue for negotiations of a treaty banning the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons or other explosive devices.
On panel three which focused on negative security assurances (NSAs), many argued that these assurances were seen as appropriate in reassuring non-nuclear weapon states which had agreed under the NPT not to acquire nuclear weapons that they would not be threatened or attacked with nuclear weapons. The value of negative security assurances also lay in contributing to the non-proliferation objectives of the NPT. In the seeming absence of legally-binding NSAs, alternative approaches were voiced, including the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones. Ideas based on international humanitarian law, human rights and the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, focusing particularly on the mass destruction entailed in targeting cities were raised to underline the urgency of concluding an effective international arrangement on NSAs. The seeking of NSAs was not seen as confirming the ongoing possession of nuclear arms but as merely an interim measure pending the elimination of nuclear weapons.

On panel four which focused on the prevention of an arms race in outer space, it was made clear that space services are now a critical resource. Discussions pointed to the need for future international collaboration, including on Transparency and Confidence Building Measures (TCBMs). Other initiatives such as an international code of conduct and a treaty on the prevention of the placement of weapons in Outer Space (PPWT) were also discussed. The importance of making sure such initiatives are complementary was stressed and it was made clear that political measures may act as stepping stones towards legally-binding solutions. A distinction was drawn between mechanisms or processes on the one hand and concepts on the other with a view to facilitating focus on issues of substance rather than those of process. The concept of ‘weapon’ was seen by some as something that can be defined but by others as a difficult concept to apply to the space domain. Several key topics were mentioned, including the role of a verification component to a future space regime as a possible mechanism along with TCBMs - to ensure compliance with future international space-related commitments, but it was questioned how/if this can actually be achieved. The key role outer space assets play in verifying other arms control regimes, including START, was also noted. Space debris was identified as a serious issue requiring continued attention. Given the rate of growth in the space actors and the fast pace of technology, the view was expressed that further inclusion and motivation of civil society to participate in discussions and the importance of maintaining the relevance of the security component in wider space discussions was essential.

On panel five that considered the way forward, the collective responsibility of CD members was stressed. There were divergent views on the impact of the rules of procedure, notably the length of the Presidency, which some saw as an obstacle to progress where others viewed the protracted stalemate as external to the Conference. The potential value of subsidiary bodies and initiatives such as the schedule of activities was discussed, with some panellists rejecting their value as mere simulation and others seeing their potential in engaging the CD in substantive discussions, including by bringing in experts from outside. Some panellists expressed support for a limited expansion of CD membership and a longer Presidency was also suggested. The need to include the diverse views of civil society, including science, industry and others, was emphasized. Calls were made for the CD to examine the best ways and means of benefitting from the wealth of knowledge of civil society. Some felt that the failure to include civil society could lead to the isolation of the CD and to a situation of moving discussions outside the framework of the CD where progress could not be blocked and civil society could participate. The long-term sustainability of the CD in view of the length of an absence on agreement on a Programme of Work was raised.

In closing, the Chairman noted his readiness, pending a more formal inclusion of civil society interlocutors in the deliberations of the CD, to organize subsequent informal CD civil society fora to help develop the relationship between the CD, Member States and civil society.