

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE TO THE CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT
Geneva, 24 January 2012

*Delivered by Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev,
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I welcome the opportunity to convey greetings to the Conference on Disarmament today.

This body has long served as the world's single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum.

The Conference and its predecessors have had some impressive accomplishments.

It was in Geneva that the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Seabed Treaty, and the Environmental Modification Treaty were first considered or negotiated.

Many of these were achieved during the Cold War, proving that it is possible to create global legal norms even in times of great political disagreements.

Yet today, this distinguished body is no longer living up to expectations. The last occasion on which the Conference fulfilled the negotiating role given to it by the United Nations General Assembly was in 1996, when the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty emerged from an intensive three-year process.

Not only do the members of the Conference disagree over its priorities, but the consensus rule, which has served this body so well in the past, is currently used as a de facto veto power to stall every attempt to break the impasse.

Some states want negotiations on nuclear disarmament. Some want to ban the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons. Some want a treaty protecting non-nuclear-weapon states against the threat or use of nuclear weapons. Others want a treaty to prevent an arms race in outer space.

Even if a large majority of the members is ready to begin negotiations on a fissile material treaty, some are eager to "precondition" the outcome of such negotiations even though it is clear that national security interests can be defended most effectively during the negotiations and, later, in the national signature and ratification process.

The future of the Conference is in the hands of its member states. But I can not stand by and watch it decline into irrelevancy, as states consider other negotiating arenas.

Both the high-level meeting that I convened in September 2010 and the General Assembly's plenary follow-up meeting last July were not just exercises in criticising the status quo, though certainly such critiques featured prominently. Above all, these gatherings were opportunities for the world community to voice its support for new progress in this field.

In 2012, the future of the Conference will be under the spotlight as never before. Lamenting the constraints of the rules of procedure or the "absence of political will" can no longer suffice as explanations for any further lack of progress. The General Assembly is seized of the matter and, if the Conference remains deadlocked, is ready to consider other options to move the disarmament agenda forward.

I urge you to seize this moment, when the world is focused intently on advancing disarmament goals. I appeal to you to support the immediate commencement of negotiations in the Conference on agreed disarmament issues. Prior agreement on their scope or final outcomes should not be a precondition for the start of negotiations, or an excuse to avoid them.

The tide of disarmament is rising, yet the Conference on Disarmament is in danger of sinking. Let us restore the Conference to the central role it can and must play in strengthening the rule of law in the field of disarmament. It is our shared responsibility to make the Conference work, not only for us but for future generations.