Statement at the Conference on Disarmament – 26.06.2018

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Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

First, let me congratulate you, Ambassador Walid Doudechon, on your assumption of Presidency, at this crucial time for the Conference on Disarmament. The delegation of Sri Lanka would continue to extend its support and cooperation towards achieving a balanced and comprehensive programme.

The delegation of Sri Lanka would also like to take this opportunity to convey its appreciation of the initiative and leadership demonstrated by the past Presidents of the CD.

We thank Her Excellency the Minister of European Integration and Foreign Affairs for her inspiring words about the creative potential and ability of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in addressing challenges to peace and security. We also thank Mr. Michael Moller, DG for his presence here today.

Mr. President,

In the months of May and June, we have heard a number of statements on some substantive and procedural matters in the Conference on Disarmament. Unfortunately, there has been no sustained focus on the disarmament agenda launched by the UN Secretary-General on 24 May 2018 in Geneva. It is important that deliberations take place over it at the relevant fora, in particular this body.

In this context, we very much appreciate the initiative taken by you, Mr. President, to discuss the UN SG’s disarmament agenda in the CD during your Presidency. We fervently look forward to that discussion.

Mr. President,

Progress in Disarmament has been held up for over 20 years, specially since the UN CD last adopted a treaty CTBT - in 1996. All efforts and
initiatives aimed at adopting a programme of work, have since failed. Procedural wrangling and substantive disorientation have consistently marked the functioning this today, thus creating on a perception of a 'normal’ of inaction. The inequities inherent to the nuclear disarmament discourse have only accentuated the differences among membership over long years.

It is against this backdrop, Mr. President, that we consider the SG’s disarmament agenda timely and appropriate.

Mr. President,

Launching his disarmament agenda on 24 May 2018, the UN Secretary-General graphically captured the dilemma that humanity as a whole faces today. He decried the multiple challenges to the survival of humanity, emphatically stating “we are living in dangerous times” and “the world is going backwards”. We cannot agree with him more.

The Secretary-General’s description of a “world going backwards” meant a lot more than just the reversal of norms, its centrality being the failure of disarmament-not just the nuclear one alone. His sweep was broader, but it struck at the crux of the problem-insecurity, arising from a lack of progress in disarmament in a broader sense, including lapses in implementation of obligations under the relevant treaties. What constitutes the central thrust of his disarmament agenda is the goal of eventual elimination of all types of weapons, including weapons of mass destruction.

As I stated earlier, and as the President of the CD has rightly initiated, the UN Secretary-General’s disarmament agenda should be reflected on, seriously. The issues he has raised and the observations he has made are not entirely new, but the manner they have been woven together to highlight the danger that we collectively face is no less instructive. Everyone may not agree with everything, but together, they cannot be rejected since they all represent the varied strands that make up the whole fabric of the case.

The concerns it has raised not just impact national security and global security, but human security in particular. The Secretary General calls them “indivisible”, in our view, very aptly. The dimension of human security, in the disarmament and non-proliferation context, is a refreshing addition to the notion of human security, as thus far known in other areas of UN agenda.
Mr. President,

What is the take-home message from the UN Secretary-General's disarmament agenda? How is it going to translate into reality in the current global context? We would look forward to the discussion that would convene under your Presidency to explore them comprehensively. But, we should not allow the essence of his message to fade away in the meantime.

The use of nuclear weapons, as many have called it in the recent past, is only “a human error away”, even leaving aside other possibilities of their compulsive or impulsive use.

The blurring of lines between familiar arguments advanced by states and the varied understanding of the nature and scope of-confidence building measures from one end of the spectrum to the other-one might call them negative security assurances-has impeded the effective pursuit of general and complete disarmament until now.

Work on general and complete disarmament cannot be left pending any longer while the reversal of norms is becoming real. Disarmament to save humanity, disarmament to save lives, and disarmament for future generations is the clarion call that needs to be heeded to, if the world were to survive as one. Meaningful and practical implementation of SDGs, first and foremost calls for such a vision.

It is obvious that work has to proceed at multiple levels. The CD has a mandated role to negotiate and produce an outcome that would have, at its heart, in our belief, ensuring human security in the manner articulated in the Secretary-General’s disarmament agenda. Dialogue needs to commence in regions and cross-regions to evolve arms control mechanisms, or zones of peace free from WMDs, thus contributing to durable international peace and security. Negative security assurances require unambiguous and unqualified expression as an integral aspect of the goal of eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.

Translating all aspects of the Secretary-General’s disarmament agenda into action calls for the active summoning of the political will, accompanied by a clear ‘commitment to move forward’. Within CD, we should make concerted, expeditious efforts to evolve a programme of work through consensus.

The first test of reality has been provided by Decision 2119 adopted in February 2018. This, along with Decision 2126, has led to the establishment of 5 Subsidiary Bodies to discuss and build consensus on the varied aspects of disarmament discourse, as identified in CD Decisions. We complement the coordinators for the initiative and the
focused discussions so far within the Subsidiary Bodies and encourage all delegations to move forward with a view to achieving consensus. If successful early enough, they could possibly lead us to arriving at a programme of work, that has eluded us for over two decades. The essential responsibility of this body to negotiate a programme of work, however, remains.

Mr. President,

As we delve into the substantive content of the SG’s disarmament agenda, it would do well to consider avoiding familiar arguments that have kept us apart for too long. We should aim to bring all elements in the SG’s disarmament agenda that are relevant to the mandate of the CD, to bear upon the deliberations within this body. Familiar arguments often dominate discussions when one side does not want to move away from the hard position it has taken, while expecting the other yet to make compromises.

Progress in disarmament is both urgent and important. Today is no time to haggle over procedural aspects, especially when we have abandoned substance for far too long. The need for innovative and creative approaches is now pronounced. The SG’s disarmament agenda appears to reflect such an approach for the future.

While we attune ourselves to the urgency of the SG’s call, we also need to address a matter of serious interest to the developing countries. The inaction or lack of progress in disarmament has caused over two decades, a loss of a generation of professionals and experts in disarmament in many countries. Increased availability of disarmament education and fellowship opportunities-a matter that the UN Secretary-General has not spoken of when launching his disarmament agenda-is imperative and should receive the attention that it deserves.

Thank you, Mr. President.