High-level fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) expert preparatory group: Informal Consultations

Remarks by

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At the outset, I would like to thank Director General Hulan for accepting the proposal by the Secretary-General to serve as Chair of the high-level fissile material cut-off treaty expert preparatory group.

I also want to thank the co-sponsors of the resolution establishing this high-level expert preparatory group, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. In particular, I am grateful to the Government of Canada for their leadership and for their on-going commitment to pursuing a fissile material treaty.

Canada’s dedication to a treaty on fissile materials for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices is indisputable and laudable. The Shannon mandate is an enduring reminder of Canada’s contribution.

It has been twenty-two years since the Shannon Mandate was agreed by consensus at the Conference on Disarmament. The objective of a fissile material treaty is much older than that. It has been on the international agenda for almost sixty years. From the Baruch Plan, to the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament, to the First Special Session of the General Assembly on Disarmament, to the 13 Practical Steps of the 2000 NPT Review Conference.

But for too long this objective has not been acted upon. Despite the near-universal support among Member States for such a treaty, we cannot even commence negotiations.

This is unacceptable.

A number of attempts have been made to jumpstart negotiations, both within and outside of the Conference on Disarmament. Unfortunately, however, the stalemate cannot be broken.

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates

This preparatory group comes at a critical juncture for the future of nuclear disarmament for three reasons.

First, growing frustration. Many non-nuclear weapon States and the global public are frustrated by the stalled pace of disarmament. With the scheduled expiration of the “New
Start” treaty in February 2021, there are no binding arms control commitments on the horizon.

Instead of new plans for reductions, we see expensive modernisation programmes. Some nuclear arsenals appear to be expanding, not contracting. The dependence by some States on nuclear deterrence appears to go up, not down. Even the historic arms control accords of the late 1980s are endangered by claims and counter-claims of non-compliance.

Second, greater uncertainty in the international system. In his message to the Conference on Disarmament in January, Secretary-General Guterres described “a world of new and old conflicts woven in a complex, interconnected web”.

This increasingly complex global environment of entrenched and emerging threats is a by-product of globalisation and the growing volatility in international security. Threats are interlinked and transnational. They cannot be addressed by one single State or organisation alone.

Threats and risks are exacerbated by spiralling military expenditures and enhanced risks of proliferation, including by non-state actors. Rapidly evolving technology, especially in cyber and outer space, and artificial intelligence is changing the face of battle. It outpaces regulation and multiplies security challenges.

Third, the malaise in the United Nations disarmament machinery. For two decades no meaningful outcomes have been produced. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty – the last product of the CD – has yet to enter into force. Despite the concerted efforts of many States, in recent years, the CD has not even been able to agree on a programme of work. The United Nations Disarmament Commission has not produced an outcome since 1999. The credibility of the machinery itself is at stake.

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates

It is against this backdrop that Member States will be engaged in an important action-oriented agenda in 2017. It is an agenda that consists of three key initiatives: This high-level preparatory group; the commencement of the 2020 NPT Review Cycle; and the negotiations on the Prohibition Treaty.

Progress – or lack thereof – in one will affect the other two.

Being the first among the three, we need positive movement from this group all the more. We cannot afford further stagnation.

We must aim for the best outcome. That requires, among other things, inclusive engagement. We cannot achieve our goal of the elimination of nuclear weapons without it – between the nuclear haves and the nuclear have-nots, and between the nuclear-armed States themselves.
I applaud the innovative approach represented by today’s consultations and those scheduled for next year. They will provide opportunities for all Member States to have their say and, crucially, to listen to the positions of others. That should be the starting point in enabling any compromise solution to emerge. I count on all Member States to make the most of these opportunities.

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates

Let us make an auspicious start to this year with this group. Let us summon the necessary creativity and flexibility to produce positive results.

Together we can make 2017 a year of action and of revitalisation for the nuclear disarmament agenda. Together we can move toward our shared goal of a world safer, more secure, without nuclear weapons and better for all.

I wish you the best for fruitful deliberations.

Before conceding the floor, I would like to add a few words about one more item of business, namely the composition of the preparatory group. For your information, I will read, in an alphabetical order, the names of the countries invited to nominate an expert: Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Egypt, Estonia, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, Poland, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Senegal, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States.

We are still in the process of receiving the names of nominated experts from these countries. We hope this process will be completed as soon as possible. We look forward to working closely with the Chair and the members of the group. I would also like to express my appreciation to all Member States whose delegates are actively participating in today’s meeting.

I thank you so much.