Opening statement to the First Committee of the General Assembly at its 74th session

Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

New York
10/10/2019
H.E. Mr. President of the General Assembly,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for this opportunity once again to address the members of the First Committee as it commences its General Debate.

At the outset, I would like to extend my personal congratulations to you, Mr. Chair, upon your election to preside over the work of the Committee. I also wish to extend my appreciation to the other members of the Bureau.

I also wish to extend my personal gratitude to Ambassador Ion Jinga of Romania for his skillful steering of the proceedings of the Committee during its seventy-third session, and to the other members of the Bureau of the previous session.

In view of how this session started, I feel compelled to recall the remark of the Secretary-General at the opening of the 74th Session of the General Assembly just last month. He highlighted the profound expectations people place on our Organization and the “unique and indispensable forum” the General Assembly, in particular, represents. Collectively, we owe it to the people of this world to tackle the pressing issues of our time in a spirit of cooperation and compromise.

I ask all of you to start in full the substantive work of this Committee’s mandate on disarmament and international security matters.

In addressing the General Assembly at the beginning of its general debate, the Secretary-General expressed his concern about the global landscape, where, in his words, “we see conflicts persisting, terrorism spreading, and the risk of a new arms race growing”.

I echo both the Secretary-General’s concern for us as leaders to deliver for “we, the peoples”, as well as his concern regarding the present state of affairs. Military spending, arms transfers and the incidence of armed conflict worldwide all remain high. Moreover, global anxiety
about international security continues to grow as the international security and arms control architecture shows signs of unraveling.

It was precisely in response to the deteriorating international security environment and the erosion of international arms control that the Secretary-General launched his Agenda for Disarmament, “Securing Our Common Future”, last year. In his Agenda he aims to place disarmament at the center of global efforts to maintain and promote international peace and security.

I wish to express appreciation for the thus far 19 States and one regional organization that have demonstrated their commitment to the Agenda as Champions or Supporters. Since we launched the implementation plan in October of last year, we have seen marked progress to more than two-thirds of the actions. But more remains to be done by all stakeholders.

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In one of the key pillars of his Agenda, “Disarmament to Save Humanity”, the Secretary-General highlighted the existential threat that nuclear weapons pose to humanity. He stressed this threat must motivate us to accomplish new and decisive action leading to their total elimination.

However, a toxic combination of dangerous rhetoric, qualitative weapons development, eroding relations between nuclear-armed States and the progressive unwinding of former arms control agreements means that, as Secretary-General Guterres said to the General Assembly, “the perils posed by nuclear weapons are not merely hypothetical or in some far-off future; they are present and real.”

For this reason, the total elimination of nuclear weapons remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations.

Member States of this Committee have a clear choice before them: they can either work together to prevent the continued erosion of the disarmament and arms control regime, or they can allow our collective security to be further imperiled by these weapons that pose existential threats.
I am hopeful that Member States will encourage the parties to the New START treaty to extend that important constraint on strategic nuclear weapons, as a prelude to new negotiations on further reductions. I call upon States to redouble their efforts to bring about the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and negotiations on a treaty prohibiting the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. I welcome the commitment to the elimination of nuclear weapons shown by those States who support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It is a demonstration of the value that many States continue to place on multilateral approaches.

Yet we cannot achieve nuclear disarmament without engagement with nuclear-armed States. All States should work together to reduce the dangers posed by nuclear weapons. We should look to find common ground on issues ranging from how to address new vulnerabilities posed by emerging technologies, to building our shared technical capacity to verify nuclear disarmament.

This work will be integral to setting the stage for a successful review conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons next year and ensuring that it retains its place as the load-bearing pillar of our efforts in disarmament and non-proliferation.

There are many regional dimensions to the work of the First Committee and my Office remains fully engaged at the regional level.

I share the Secretary-General’s hope that progress on nuclear non-proliferation represented by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action can be preserved.

The first session of the conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction will take place in New York next month. A successful conference initiating a process for the establishment of this long sought-after goal should have a positive impact on the 2020 NPT Review Conference as well as contribute to peace and security efforts in the Middle East.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula remains uncertain. The key parties must now capitalize on the diplomatic opening to resolve outstanding issues.

It is not just nuclear weapons that threaten our security. Any use of chemical weapons is abhorrent and constitutes a serious violation of international law. States must work together to bring accountability to those who dare use these inhumane and illegal weapons. I reiterate
the Secretary-General’s full confidence in the professionalism, objectivity and impartiality of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Secretary-General first came up with the idea for his Disarmament Agenda, one of his priority concerns was to decrease harm to civilians resulting from contemporary armed conflict. This is why his Agenda has a strong focus on “Disarmament that Saves Lives”, another key pillar.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 50 million people are currently affected by armed conflict. Last month, the Secretary-General and the President of the ICRC released a joint appeal on the need to protect civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

We are encouraged by growing attention to this issue. I had the privilege to represent the Secretary-General at the recent conference in Vienna on protecting civilians in urban warfare. We welcome the determination of States to develop a political declaration and hope it will lead to the subsequent development of practical measures, including appropriate limitations, common standards and operational policies designed to avoid the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The seventh Biennial Meeting of States of the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons will be held in June next year, providing States with an important opportunity to engage constructively with the recommendations of the latest report of the Secretary-General on this topic, namely considering a focus on national target-setting and addressing various recent technological developments.

I am pleased to report that my Office, together with partners in the Peacebuilding Support Office and the United Nations Development Programme, are finalizing plans for the establishment of the Saving Lives Entity (SALIENT). This facility will follow a programmatic and holistic approach in addressing, at the country level, armed violence and
illicit small-arms flows. I call on donor States to support this novel approach and thank those who have already provided contributions.

In the area of conventional ammunition, there is a clear opportunity for progress with the convening of a group of governmental experts in 2020. This is an important moment for in-depth consideration of the range of safety and security challenges arising from conventional ammunition.

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Emerging technologies, ranging from information and communications technologies and artificial intelligence, to uncrewed aerial vehicles, new space technologies and hypersonic weapons are evolving faster than our normative, legal and regulatory structures we can keep up. Without the necessary caution, transparency and foresight, these innovations will have significant negative consequences for our collective security.

For this reason, the Secretary-General designated the third pillar of his disarmament agenda “Disarmament for Future Generations”, to address those new and emerging challenges posed by the weaponization of technology.

Many of these impacts are already being felt.

For example, the number and severity of cyberattacks is growing at a rapid rate. Member States have established two processes to tackle this issue – an Open-Ended Working Group and a Group of Governmental Experts. Both have unique features. The former will hold informal multi-stakeholder discussions, the first of their kind under UN auspices. The latter is conducting regional consultations to take advantage of innovations taking place in regional bodies.

Armed uncrewed aerial vehicles, better known as drones or UAVs, pose unique challenges due to their low barrier to acquisition and the propensity to be used for attacks with low levels of perceived risk. The attacks against Saudi Arabia last month, which the Secretary-General has condemned, remind us of the need for focus on this issue from an arms control perspective.
The Office for Disarmament Affairs, together with UNIDIR, has suggested measures to increase transparency, accountability and oversight of UAVs. They remain important and timely objectives to address the overlapping humanitarian and human rights challenges.

Commensurate with its increasing importance, States continue to make progress in developing norms to ensure outer space does not become a destabilizing domain of warfare. I look forward to the forthcoming joint panel discussion of the First and Fourth Committees as an opportunity to further share experience among the expert communities that respectively focus on security and sustainability of outer space activities.

While the inability of the Group of Governmental Experts on the prevention of an arms race in outer space to agree to a substantive outcome was disappointing, it nonetheless represented the most in-depth and substantive discussion since the item was first introduced in the Conference on Disarmament in 1985. I encourage all States to build upon those discussions and to deepen engagement on this issue.

As States grapple with how to address the peace and security implications of artificial intelligence, I take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General’s strong position: Machines with the power and discretion to take lives without human involvement are politically unacceptable, morally repugnant and should be prohibited by international law.

The guiding principles affirmed by the GGE on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) are a step forward, but more work remains to be done to ensure humans remain at all times in control over the use of force.

These issues will only grow in importance for the work of this Committee. If we are to reap the benefits of technology and mitigate the concerns, it is essential to partner with its progenitors – the private sector and research communities.

Likewise, diversifying the voices heard in disarmament discussions will help their revitalization. In his agenda for disarmament, the Secretary-General prioritized gender parity as “a moral duty and an operational necessity”.

Despite some progress, the underrepresentation of women and women leaders in disarmament fora and decision-making remains a significant impediment for reaching impactful solutions. This is one reason why I have urged all Member States to ensure gender balance in their nominations for Groups of Governmental Experts and other bodies.
While I am heartened by the ever-increasing prominence of gender issues in this body, it remains my firm belief that more can and must be done by us all to call attention to and also address the gendered impact of weapons and to promote the full and equal participation of women in the field of disarmament.

I further hope that more delegations will apply a gender lens to their work and take a proactive stance in the coordination of gender-related languages across First Committee resolutions this year.

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The disarmament machinery works as a barometer of international security. This year, the United Nations Disarmament Commission was not able to hold its substantive session – for the first time since 2005. It is no secret in this Committee that we have been stumbling in the efforts to commence negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament for more than two decades. Therefore, it is more urgent and more important for the First Committee to achieve truly meaningful outcomes this year.

My colleagues and I look forward to providing whatever assistance that may be required to ensure that your work will be productive and fruitful in the Committee this year.

I wish you a successful session and I thank you very much for your attention.