



Remarks by

H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe
President of the 68th Session of the United Nations
General Assembly

Remarks during the First Part of the 2014 Session of the
Conference on Disarmament

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Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Acting Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva and acting Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, in this historic chamber, I have the pleasure to address the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and convey my respect and appreciation for your work. At the outset, allow me to thank Ambassador Manor of Israel for inviting me to address the Conference. I extend my congratulations to him, as well as to the Conference's current President, Ambassador Mati of Italy, for their leadership in conducting the CD's business.

The Conference on Disarmament was established in 1979 as the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum in the international community. In the past, the Conference and its predecessors have delivered ground-breaking results, including the adoption of landmark instruments such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons or the Chemical Weapons Convention. In your work, you have advanced the international disarmament agenda and contributed substantially to the maintenance of international peace and security, one of the founding goals of our United Nations Charter. You have built trust among States and made our world safer for all. These achievements are important and commendable.

Yet unfortunately, whoever speaks to this esteemed body – myself included – can only reference its past successes. The last great achievement of this Conference dates back to 24 September 1996 – nearly 20 years ago – when the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was negotiated. If the tide does not turn, you risk being defined by your history.

As President of the 68th session of the General Assembly, I must stress that this body is too valuable to suffer such a fate. In the final document of the First Special Session of the

General Assembly devoted to Disarmament (SSOD 1), the Assembly recognized the need for a single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum. I can assure you that this collective preference remains unchanged. Please allow me to share with you why I think this is so.

Looking at some of the events and discussions of the current General Assembly session, I see strong support and interest among the UN membership for a lively and vital Conference on Disarmament, ready for negotiations.

Excellencies,

Last September, the honour was mine to open the first ever high-level meeting of the General Assembly dedicated to nuclear disarmament. Seventy-four statements were made by Heads of State and Government, ministers and other representatives. I was very impressed by participants' dedication and will to move forward and progress on the issues raised. Among the many topics upon which participants touched were the revitalization of the disarmament machinery and approaches on how to take forward multilateral negotiations to achieve a world without nuclear weapons, including through the humanitarian initiative.

In my summary of the high level meeting, I noted the following: [quote] "States expressed serious concern regarding the continued stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament, including its failure to agree on, and implement a comprehensive and balanced programme of work." [End quote] I also noted that many States reaffirmed the role of the Conference on Disarmament as the single multilateral negotiating body on disarmament, as established by the SSOD 1; and my summary reflected that States had recalled the importance of multilateralism in advancing nuclear disarmament objectives. States asked for intensified efforts across regional groups in order to move beyond old divisions and entrenched positions, and find elements of consensus.

These same sentiments are echoed in General Assembly Resolution 66/66 entitled “Revitalizing the work of the Conference on Disarmament and taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations.” In this resolution, the Assembly calls upon States to intensify efforts aimed at creating an environment conducive to multilateral disarmament negotiations. The resolution invites States to explore options, proposals and elements to revitalize the United Nations disarmament machinery as a whole, including the Conference on Disarmament.

At last October’s session of the Assembly’s First Committee, intensive discussions among delegations clearly revealed that revitalizing the disarmament machinery, and first and foremost the Conference on Disarmament, was an emerging and pressing priority. The General Assembly recognized the need to conduct multilateral negotiations with the aim of reaching agreement on concrete issues, particularly given tensions in the present international climate and global concerns about proliferation. Yet the Assembly also noted with renewed concern that despite intensive efforts by States and successive Presidents of the Conference on Disarmament to reach consensus on a programme of work, the CD has not succeeded in beginning its substantive work.

In this regard, I was pleased to learn that just this very morning, you decided to re-establish the informal working group with a mandate to produce a programme of work that is [quote] “robust in substance and progressive over time in implementation.” [End quote] I would like to congratulate you for having taken this crucial step again, but real progress must now be made. I repeat: this work and its purpose are far too important not to be pursued with vigour until success is achieved. As you move forward, I remind you to stay focused on the bigger picture, overcome your differences and live up to your responsibilities. With so many other sectors and domains evolving and moving forward, we cannot afford a complete stalemate in the Conference year after year. The Conference has an irreplaceable responsibility in the advancement of the international agenda, and you must do your part to ensure progress is made.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now turn to an important issue that is also very much linked to my overall theme for the current (68th) session of the General Assembly, namely, “The Post-2015 Development Agenda: Setting the Stage”.

Many of you were in New York when I addressed the First Committee of the General Assembly last October. As I mentioned during that address, in one way or the other, each and every item we discuss in the General Assembly reinforces sustainable development. The decisions you make here not only contribute to peace and security, but inevitably impact upon other aspects of the UN’s work.

The Geneva Disarmament community, one of the most respected and knowledgeable communities among us, has unique potential for contributing to a better world for all. Your network, synergies with other services in Geneva, your infrastructure, can and must be used responsibly and productively – not only in this Conference, but also beyond it. Let us not forget that where we put our time, resources and energy is an indicator of what we truly value. When we value education, healthcare, poverty reduction and sustainable development, our actions and choices must likewise offer proof of that.

I welcome this broader perspective in which the disarmament community is looking at the various challenges it faces. In particular, I note the increasing international focus on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Due to their massive powers of destruction, the use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic global consequences and would cause severe and long-lasting emergencies: humanitarian, global health, climate, social order, human development and economical. Access to social goods and services is predicated on the existence of peace and security. Development goals can only be achieved if we prevent such catastrophes on our planet. I am hopeful about the potential of the humanitarian initiative to accelerate international nuclear disarmament efforts. This must truly be a collective effort, because we face the risks posed by these weapons collectively, not as States with narrow national security interests.

Distinguished Delegates,

To conclude, let me reiterate that the Conference on Disarmament plays a crucial part in the global disarmament machinery. I urge you to use your time in the informal working group wisely, and despite the absence of a programme of work, to continue your structured dialogue on the issues on your agenda. Spare no effort in your work toward revitalizing the disarmament machinery. We can no longer jeopardize the credibility of this body and we can no longer wait for lightning to strike.

The dreams of lasting peace and sustainable development globally are ones worth working for. Peace underpins development and development demands disarmament. That is the goal toward which this Conference must strive and I wish you every success in your work for the current session.

Thank you.
