

Statement by
H.E. Dr. John W. Ashe
President of the General Assembly

High Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament

New York, 26 September 2013

Heads of State and Government,

Heads of Delegations,

Ministers,

Excellencies,

Secretary General,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to this High-level meeting on nuclear disarmament. At the outset, I wish to extend my appreciation to all- member states and the secretariat staff- who have taken part in bringing this historical event to

fruition, 67 years after the first General Assembly resolution was adopted on today's topic.

The journey to this point has been challenging and fraught with disappointment and now it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we reach our agreed destination. It was on January 10, 1946, that the United Nations General Assembly gathered for its inaugural meeting in London, England. At that time, the nascent Assembly adopted its very first resolution on a matter that was, and is, paramount to human civilization. The resolution called for (quote) "specific proposals for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction." (end quote). In 1946, with the world recently traumatized by the horrors of atomic weapons, there was no greater threat imaginable to international peace and security.

Sixty-seven (67) years later, we are assembled here for the very first time in a High-level meeting on this critical subject. We do so against a backdrop of weapons of mass

destruction and the technology to produce them having become common place and the danger of proliferation very real. Make no mistake about it – this is a historic meeting, which will have lasting implications for our present well-being and our shared future.

Excellencies,

As we go about our day-to-day lives, which for many are fraught with deep worries about feeding their families and finding clean water and safe shelter, we are not confronted with a constant worry about the threat of nuclear weapons. Yet all the while in our current world, the spectre of nuclear weapons – and let me add, all weapons – still haunts us and it is the reason why we gather today.

In January of this year, when our General Assembly adopted the resolution (A/RES/67/39) to convene this meeting, it called for “a safer world for all” and “achieving peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons.” The resolution recalls the Millennium Declaration – our

collective aspiration to live in a world free of want and fear – and it reiterates the commitment to keeping all options open for eliminating nuclear dangers, including a possible international conference to that end.

Our Assembly has, in fact, consistently stated its commitment to nuclear disarmament; it is an aspiration that has been echoed in numerous resolutions, international treaties and initiatives in the decades following the Hiroshima attack. By gathering at the highest levels, we stand committed to a peaceful world free of nuclear weapons.

Yet, concrete and meaningful progress that should accompany our aspiration has largely been missing. Many attempts to rid the world of the most powerful and destructive weapons ever built by mankind have failed.

Some of our multilateral disarmament fora have not advanced their agendas in the way we would have hoped – particularly, the Conference on Disarmament. Further,

although the Comprehensive-Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty was adopted almost 20 years ago by our Assembly, it has still not entered into force. Throughout recent decades, we have been continually stymied by differing views and approaches.

However, there are many committed individuals and organizations actively working toward the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agendas:

Our Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has kept nuclear disarmament as a priority, putting forth his 5-point nuclear disarmament proposal in October 2010.

We have seen valuable contributions from, among others, the Open-ended Working Group on Advancing Multilateral Disarmament negotiations that met in Geneva, as well as from the consortium of UN Members that is focused on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use.

Civil society has also been active and engaged in pushing this agenda forward. Seventy-seven (77) non-governmental organizations with more than 180 representatives have registered for today's High-level meeting.

Each of these contributions has an important role and we rely on this continued commitment to remind the world why we need to be more resolute on the path to "zero" weapons.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are now in the second week of the 68th session of the United Nations General Assembly, for which I have selected the theme: "The Post 2015 Development Agenda: Setting the Stage!" At first glance, perhaps there is no direct link between today's meeting, this theme and the other High-Level meetings of the week. But a broader examination reveals something we all know to be true: as we put time, resources and energy into maintaining and expanding this ever increasing weaponry complex, we

divert resources from education, healthcare, poverty reduction, and the overall goal to move towards more sustainable development.

Is it not a sad irony that as we endeavour to improve the lives of people around the world, we devote significant attention and investment to vehicles that would destroy them? Therefore, as called for previously by this Assembly (A/RES/67/40), I urge you to devote part of the resources made available by the implementation of disarmament and arms limitation agreements to economic and social development.

Distinguished Guests,

On Sept 21, 1998, a man we all admire for his courage and his convictions, stood in this Assembly of Nations at its 53rd session and said: “We must face the fact that after countless initiatives and resolutions, we still do not have concrete and generally accepted proposals supported by a

clear commitment by the nuclear-weapons States to the speedy, final and total elimination of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons capabilities.”

In his speech, he made the link between nuclear disarmament and the need to eliminate poverty and ensure human well-being for all. He posed a question: “....to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction - why do they need them anyway!”

That man’s name is NELSON MANDELA and today, I believe we owe it to ourselves and the citizens of the world to provide an honourable and fitting answer to his question - because he is a man who in the view of many deserves our answer.

67 years have gone by and it is now time for us to come together and resolve this issue.

Excellencies,

Today's historic high-level meeting provides an opportunity to honor the vision of the Millennium Declaration and to renew our commitment to a world free of fear. A world with catastrophic weapons is not safe, nor does it help achieve peace and security for all.

As President of the General Assembly, I stand ready to provide any support possible to strengthen and further the disarmament agenda, which is already a high priority for this Assembly.

Building on today's meeting and the work many of you are already doing, we can make significant progress – to advancing the agenda before us and to creating a world that honors what we all truly value: security, prosperity and peace and human well-being.

Thank you.