

1991 UNDC: Fiddling Over Militarism's Flames

The United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC) held its annual substantive session from April 22 to May 13 at United Nations headquarters in New York.

The 1991 session marked the beginning of the UNDC's work under a reformed structure. The new structure limits the number of items on the working agenda to four, thereby preventing the problem of an overloaded agenda which, in the view of many observers, hindered the UNDC's work in the late 1980s. The reforms also limit consideration of any item on the agenda to a maximum of three years. Canada and others hope this will pressure delegations to move towards conclusions in their deliberations, rather than fall into limitless debate without clear direction or outcome.

The Canadian delegation, led by Ambassador for Disarmament Peggy Mason, played an active role in all four UNDC working groups. Canada believes that the work of the 1991 session offers some grounds for optimism that the reformed UNDC may acquire a more constructive and relevant role in multilateral arms control and disarmament than it has occupied in the past.

Canada was particularly pleased that an item entitled "Regional approach to disarmament within the context of global security" was included on the agenda. This reflects Canada's view that sources of tension and causes of arms build-ups in certain regions are primarily of a regional nature, rather than an extension of a broader East-West conflict. This has become increasingly evident in recent years as East-West relations have improved dramatically, yet a number of regions continue to be characterized by chronic tensions and high levels of armament.

In her opening statement to the working group, Ambassador Mason summarized Canada's approach to this subject. She stated that "regional approaches to disarmament have a unique and irreplaceable place in our collective pursuit of the broader objectives of disarmament and international security. Measures implemented in a regional context complement steps that, because

of their nature, may be more appropriately undertaken at a global level or, in some cases, bilaterally."

A number of useful papers were submitted to this working group touching on various aspects of regional disarmament. Canada tabled a paper entitled "Open Skies in other Regional Contexts: Lessons of the Current Negotiations," the purpose of which was to inform the international community at large of the principal issues occupying the Open Skies negotiations and to draw conclusions that might be of value should states in another regional context someday endeavour to negotiate a similar type of regime.

"The role of science and technology in the context of international security, disarmament and other related fields" was another new item of constructive discussion. In the words of its final report, the group addressed "a wide-ranging and challenging mandate encompassing matters that have never before been dealt with in a systematic debate in the UN." One of the most interesting and important themes considered by this working group was the issue of transfers of sensitive high tech-

nologies with military applications, an issue of great significance in addressing weapons proliferation concerns.

A third item on the agenda was "Process of nuclear disarmament in the framework of international peace and security, with the objective of the elimination of nuclear weapons." This item, which addressed the full range of nuclear disarmament issues, regrettably demonstrated the lack of progress that characterized work on a similar item in previous years.

Finally, the UNDC continued its consideration of the item entitled "Objective information on military matters," initiated at the 1990 session. This working group considered a number of ways of increasing openness and transparency, including extending the UN reporting system on military expenditures and establishing a UN register of conventional arms transfers. Consideration of this item will be concluded at next year's session and Canada hopes that an agreed-upon set of principles and recommendations will emerge.

Despite the stimulating exchange of views that took place at the 1991 session, the Canadian delegation registered



Ambassador for Disarmament Peggy Mason and Canadian Mission Counsellor Colonel Douglas Fraser at the 1991 UNDC session in New York.

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