



The United Nations Disarmament Commission

The following article was prepared by the Arms Control and Disarmament Division of the Department of External Affairs.

The United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC), a deliberative body operating as an offshoot of the UN General Assembly, met at the United Nations in New York in May of this year. The six items on its agenda were the arms race in all its aspects, the reduction of military budgets, South Africa's nuclear capability, curbing the naval arms race, the role of the UN in disarmament and the 1980s as the Second Disarmament Decade. All 159 UN member states are represented in the UNDC.

On May 8, Mr. Douglas Roche, the Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, made the opening Canadian address to the Commission. He said that a central task before delegates was to appraise the progress made during the Second Disarmament Decade. He pointed out that "at the midway point of the decade, achievement has been zero". He stated:

"Instead of concrete progress, we are slipping away from the goal to which all countries subscribed when they gave a consensus agreement to the Final Document of the First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978.

It is as though we have forgotten the ringing call to sanity that we flashed around the world in 1978: 'Mankind is confronted with a choice; we must halt the arms race and proceed to disarmament or face annihilation'."

In dealing with the item on the arms race, Ambassador Roche outlined the Canadian Government's priorities: to contribute to progress in the US/USSR bilateral talks; to work for a comprehensive test ban treaty; to ensure the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons; to work for the conclusion of a convention on chemical weapons; and to work towards the prevention of an arms race in outer space. He referred to the resumption of bilateral negotiations in Geneva between the United States and the Soviet Union as offering renewed hope for substantive cuts in nuclear arms. He said "every step possible must be taken in the multilateral forums to reinforce the bilateral

process" and that "we must find a way to break out of the present impasse on arms control and disarmament issues if the multilateral process is not to lose all credibility". As he pointed out, "our job — here in the UNDC and in all other multilateral forums — is clear: cut out the dithering and get down to work".

In addressing the other UNDC agenda items, he made the following points: "Last year the UNDC continued its effort to elaborate the principles that should govern states in freezing and reducing military budgets, but could not reach final agreement on a set of guidelines. The Canadian delegation has supported the idea of reducing military expenditures. In our view, the reporting exercise which the United Nations has devised is a prerequisite for progress on this issue and we have given it our support by annually completing the standardized reporting instrument. We urge states which have not yet completed the standardized reporting instrument to do so as soon as possible to enable real progress to be made in reducing military spending levels globally. Without such a data base, any attempt to reduce military budgets will remain but a pious profession of intent.

There is currently underway a comprehensive study on the naval arms race by a group of governmental experts established by the thirty-eighth session of the United Nations General Assembly... Consequently, the Disarmament Commission would be advised to consider this item only after completion of the study which is to be submitted to the fortieth UNGA.

It is our hope that a consensus can be reached at this session on the item relating to South Africa's nuclear capability. Canada's position is one of clear and consistent opposition to the repugnant apartheid policies of South Africa. We have also consistently attempted to strengthen the international non-proliferation regime. We, therefore, support calls for all states, including South Africa, to make an internationally binding non-proliferation commitment and to place all their nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards."

In a later intervention when dealing

with the role of the United Nations in disarmament, the Canadian delegation warned the UN about "overextending its limited resources to too many inconclusive undertakings. It should aim at successfully accomplishing a few important tasks." What these tasks should be is a matter of priorities:

"Certain priorities have already been set in the UNSSOD I Final Document. The highest priority has been given to the question of nuclear weapons. Concern about preventing the weaponization of outer space before it is too late is also uppermost in the minds of most countries. The dangers regarding the proliferation and actual use of chemical weapons surely warrant that that subject be included in the short list as well. The UN has already embarked on two other global projects — the Reduction of Military Budgets and Disarmament and Development — on which it should follow through. Whatever mechanism is devised to set the UN's priorities, it surely will include these major items as requiring the UN's full attention at this stage."

The Canadian delegation expressed concern that "unless it can produce some concrete results, the United Nations General Assembly runs the risk of losing credibility and of having only a marginal role in arms control and disarmament matters."

The delegation made the following comments on ways to strengthen the UN's role in the field of disarmament:

"(a) We would like to see a sharper focus on top priority issues by the General Assembly.

(b) We would like to see strong, practical support for the United Nations disarmament efforts from the United Nations Disarmament Commission, the Secretariat and related United Nations bodies which will enhance the negotiating and deliberative processes and broaden public knowledge of the issues.

(c) We would like to see the removal of the procedural obstacles to negotiations by the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

(d) We would like to see a greater sensitizing of the Security Council to the arms control and disarmament problem in the context of the broad efforts to