

(Mr. Sadleir, Australia)

The conclusion of a chemical weapons convention is, in Australia's view, one of the most important tasks before the Committee on Disarmament. Under successive dynamic chairmen the Ad Hoc Working Group has tackled the task well at the past three sessions. Key issues have been identified; broad agreement has been reached on the main problems; alternative formulations for elements of the future convention have been advanced. Novel approaches have been successfully tried. These approaches have included resort to highly informal sessions and periods of intense concentration with experts strengthening delegations. The Soviet Union last year submitted "basic provisions" for a chemical weapons convention. The United States is shortly to table its own detailed ideas. My delegation greatly welcomes this development. We welcome, too, the steady stream of new ideas and technical papers from many quarters, as well as the active involvement demonstrated by all delegations. In view of the promise generated by the work of the Working Group on Chemical Weapons, I urge that no hiatus and no hesitation be allowed to damage its prospects and that it be permitted without faltering speedily to continue its operations under a new Chairman.

The key problems before the Working Group relate to scope and to verification. On scope, my delegation believes that the case of including a ban on the use of chemical weapons is stronger than ever. Ambiguities remain as to the existing prohibition; it is also the case that the use of chemical weapons reportedly continues. Moreover, the concept at the heart of the future convention -- that there must be a ban on the use of chemicals as weapons -- is a concept of use; and the so-called "general purpose criterion" which all agree should define this concept is a use criterion. Having said that, my delegation will carefully examine any alternative ways to meet our central concern. It may prove possible, for example, by providing in the convention for strong verification mechanisms which would be triggered by evidence that these repugnant weapons have been used, decisively to end the prospects of that ever happening.

Verification is the central issue. The international community must have some way of ensuring that treaty commitments are being honoured. National arrangements can certainly simplify the task but they can never be a substitute for verification measures of international scope. The Ad Hoc Working Group has recently gone into greater depth on what chemical stocks States should declare when they become parties to the convention, and on what procedures are necessary to destroy stocks: the conclusion which seems increasingly inescapable is that a strong system of international checking is essential to these and other aspects of the future treaty. Such a system, it is clear, must provide for a measure of on-site inspection under international auspices. How much, how intrusive and how often are questions awaiting answers and elaboration, but the principle is a fundamental one. On-site inspection, strengthened as necessary by remote sensors and other non-intrusive technological means, is the key to achieving a chemical weapons convention. If agreement is reached here, the outstanding issues will almost certainly fall into place.

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