

No. 55/14

DISARMAMENT

Statement by the Minister of National Health and Welfare, and Chairman of the Canadian Delegation to the tenth session of the United Nations General Assembly, Mr. Paul Martin, made in the Disarmament Commission, October 21, 1955.

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I had, and I still have very considerable doubts whether it is a good idea or whether it was a good idea to suggest at this time a meeting of the Disarmament Commission, particularly when the report of the Sub-Committee of this Commission has just now become available, as of 8 o'clock this morning and when the members of the Commission cannot possibly have had time to study it carefully, to assess its implications and to obtain instructions from governments. Now, I would not want this observation in any way to be interpreted as an indication that we do not welcome in this Commission and in the Assembly of the United Nations a full-scale debate on disarmament. Like other members around this table, my Government attaches the greatest importance to this particular matter and we recognize that the time will come when a general discussion in the General Assembly will perhaps be made desirable but certainly we have little hesitation in saying that this moment has not yet arrived. On the contrary, all members of the United Nations are keenly interested in disarmament and I am confident that the views of all members of the organization not represented in the Sub-Committee should be fully ventilated on the subject. But again, it is a point whether it is fair to put the voluminous record of the Sub-Committee before them and to expect delegations to express a considered opinion, almost without notice and certainly without an opportunity for the kind of deliberations which the very nature of the subject demands. And from my six weeks' acquaintance with Mr. Sobolev, for whom personally I have the highest regard, I cannot really believe that he seriously thinks that it is possible for us to do otherwise.

I can therefore support with full understanding and sympathy the points of view expressed by the Representatives of New Zealand, of Belgium and Peru. We, the members of the Sub-Committee of the Disarmament Commission have already had ample opportunity to express our views on this subject and it is surely a primary purpose of a meeting of the Disarmament Commission to give an adequate opportunity to the members of the Commission not on the Sub-Committee to express their considered views on this immensely important subject. And so, I must agree strongly with the statements made here to the effect that this sudden calling of the Disarmament Commission on the very day on which the vast documentation of the Sub-Committee has been made public does not give the members of the Disarmament Commission anything like a fair opportunity to express their views. I would also add that in my opinion the meeting is premature for another reason, and that has been mentioned by several speakers this morning. I refer of course to the fact that there is to be a meeting in Geneva of the Foreign Ministers of France, the Soviet

Union, the United Kingdom and the United States, countries without whose participation in the matter of disarmament we could not logically or reasonably expect progress to be made. Now, after the Foreign Ministers have met, the view of my Government is that the Sub-Committee should not hesitate to resume its meeting. We all know that the Sub-Committee owes its creation to a decision of the General Assembly. And so, we will await hopefully the meetings of the Foreign Ministers and then, I trust, without much delay proceed to our work in the Sub-Committee. It seems to me that it would be unwise, from any point of view, for the Sub-Committee or for the Disarmament Commission or for the General Assembly to be engaged in a discussion of a matter which the Foreign Ministers among others will be discussing when they convene in Geneva. I have said that we should return to the work of the Sub-Committee as quickly and as expeditiously as possible. We should not forget the long and tedious negotiations that were required at the Ninth Session of the United Nations to bring about a unanimous resolution and the long deliberations of the Sub-Committee, and we should not therefore lightly dismiss its work in the past and its future operations.

In spite of these considerations this meeting has been called at the request of the Representative of the Soviet Union. We have listened with great interest to the statement which he has made. I don't think it is unnatural that he stressed the proposals advanced by his own delegation but we must remember that our report lists a great many other proposals, as you will see, in addition to those advanced on May 10 in London by the Soviet Delegation and on July 21 at Geneva by Premier Bulganin. Further explanations and negotiations are needed before we can reasonably expect other members of the Disarmament Commission or of the United Nations as a whole to be ready to accept or reject any particular one of these proposals. Now, the report of the Sub-Committee is, I think, in the nature of an interim report, for we refer to the possibility of further meetings of the Sub-Committee and the submission of a supplementary report. It was certainly the hope of my Delegation that some progress might have been made at the Geneva Meeting of the Four Foreign Ministers which would have provided basis for further Sub-Committee meetings and a supplementary report. And I do not give up the hope, speaking for Canada, that we may look forward to progressive and constructive steps in this matter when the Foreign Ministers meet.

Now, with regard to our report, in spite of the vast bulk of the verbatim records (of which we were reminded this morning by Mr. Munro), our report is essentially a modest one. It registers some progress -- the Soviet proposal of May 10 incorporated a number of important proposals formerly advanced by Western Delegations -- but admittedly there is still a substantial gap separating us from a general agreement on a Disarmament Programme.

Nevertheless, we feel that the report, or more accurately the situation which we have now reached in our negotiations, has its encouraging aspects. A great deal of resourcefulness and ingenuity has been demonstrated in the preparation of the various plans and suggestions submitted to the Sub-Committee. I have in mind parts of the Soviet May 10 proposal, the proposal on the financial supervision of disarmament advanced by Premier Faure of France, the

proposal of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom for a limited inspection scheme, the various proposals on the methods, objectives and rights of inspection and supervision advanced by both the United Kingdom and French Delegations as well as the plan of the President of the United States.

It is also encouraging that there is at least partial agreement in some areas of the problem facing us. The Soviet proposals for instance of May 10, which were reiterated by Premier Bulganin at Geneva, contain provision for setting up control posts the object of which is to prevent a surprise attack by one state upon another. We do not feel that the control posts as proposed by the Soviet Union would be adequate to achieve this objective but it is notable that the main objective of President Eisenhower's scheme for exchange of military information and reciprocal aerial reconnaissance is also to provide against the possibility of a surprise attack.

Now, when Mr. Sobolev spoke this morning he mentioned something that I had said in the course of one of the meetings of the Sub-Committee. I have not been able to take down Mr. Sobolev's exact words, but he said that in our Sub-Committee, on October 7, I, on behalf of Canada, had made a statement that we had now achieved a position on which a general agreement could be based. I should like to refer to the exact words I used in the part of my statement to which I presume Mr. Sobolev refers. What I said is this (and this was at the 68th meeting and is to be found on page 22, half-way down, of the Verbatim Record of that day's meeting). I observed:

"Regarding the substantive problem of disarmament, although the gap between the positions of the powers concerned has been reduced, it remains considerable. However, it seems to me that, on the major elements of a comprehensive disarmament plan, we are no longer faced by irreconcilable proposals. The various positions taken are now, so to speak, within a negotiating distance of one another. The opportunities offered here for frank and sincere explanations and for a patient exploration of mutually acceptable solutions have been invaluable. While we remain clear as to our ultimate goal and as to many of the important steps necessary to reach it, we must also take account of certain hard scientific facts, openly recognized by all delegations here, which throw some doubt on the practicability, at present, of guaranteeing a complete prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, scientific advances could well alter this situation and, as Mr. Moch has pointed out so clearly, atomic prohibition is not a simple, all-or-nothing proposition. We might even now devise a comprehensive disarmament programme providing for a very substantial easing of the threat of nuclear weapons."

I am sure Mr. Sobolev will appreciate that he would have given a clearer picture if he had also referred to the "hard scientific facts" mentioned in what I have just quoted.

And now, while I am not anxious to introduce a controversial note in our proceedings, it is necessary to point out that the Soviet agreement has been based on

conditions which have disturbing implications. (And here may I digress to say that whatever may be the future assignment of the Disarmament Commission, it is to be hoped that the good temper and even language and the understanding of mutual positions which characterize our discussions in the Subcommittee will be emulated elsewhere.) The U.S.S.R., if I understand their position correctly, take the stand that any step towards disarmament, even the preliminary one suggested by President Eisenhower, can only be taken once comprehensive agreement has been reached on all the phases of a full disarmament programme which would extend to the banning and even the elimination of nuclear weapons. Now, this means, as we see it, in effect, that unless we can agree on everything at the same time, unless we can agree now on every step necessary to achieve 100 per cent of our objective, we should be content to do nothing, not even those things which we are all agreed could be done now and would facilitate progress towards achievement of our ultimate goals. If this is the situation, this I find very disturbing. As we all know, and as the Soviet Union itself has publicly acknowledged, in the present state of scientific knowledge, there is no possibility of checking on past production of nuclear weapons, no possibility of ensuring that an agreement on the elimination of these weapons would be effectively implemented. And so, by their insistence on full agreement which extends to this aspect of the programme, before the first stages can be initiated, I am afraid that the Soviet Union is taking up a position which may involve the indefinite postponement of any action whatever in the field of disarmament. I hope that this conclusion is wrong. I think that if this is the situation, the people of the world will find occasion to be greatly disillusioned. I hope that my interpretation is wrong.

And so, for this reason, I would hope that the members of this Commission will share our view that President Eisenhower's plan represents an ingenious and practical attempt to resolve the deadlock and a way to facilitate progress. This Commission will agree with me, I think, that, in this case as in many others, "le mieux est l'ennemi du bien", and that we would be well advised to do what we can now; I don't mean at this particular moment but at this particular juncture; gradually, as confidence increases and danger recedes, as our scientific means of control are developed, we may find that we can accomplish more than seems to be possible at this very moment. The immediate requirement therefore is not for this Commission to endorse this or that plan, but for all of us to join in the resolve that whatever action is possible should be initiated without delay and that all our efforts should be directed towards reaching agreement on such parts of a disarmament programme as can be effectively implemented. Now, the Eisenhower plan -- and I use the word 'plan' advisedly -- would have to be developed and elaborated on before it could be applied. But it points the way to a possible solution. It has been described, as a matter of fact, as the gateway to a broader agreement on disarmament. The choice before us is, therefore, between taking a step which all are agreed is desirable and would constitute in any case part of the broad agreement which is required on disarmament, or waiting until such broad agreement has been reached, not only on the preliminary stage but also on such subsequent stages and detailed arrangements as can be mutually accepted. I will now say

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It seems to me, therefore, that by taking the first step as recommended by the President of the United States, we would be doing immediately something practical and effective, something which we would be required to do in any case as part of any general agreement on this subject. But in so doing now, we would have already travelled part of the way towards our goal and to a considerable extent we would have improved the prospect of achieving agreement on how to proceed the rest of the way. The adoption of the plan, it seems, could not possibly prejudice the situation in any way.

As I understand the position of the Soviet Union, they find one main fault with the plan. They say: it involves no guarantee that it will lead to an agreement on the reduction of armaments and of armed forces. My answer to this point is that it is clear to us that it provides part of the answer to our problem, and that at this stage a partial answer is better than no answer at all. Furthermore, such a partial and limited answer will help create the psychological and political framework which will render the solution of the rest of the problem very much easier. Finally, to be frank, I recognize that the prospects of further agreements will depend on the sincerity and moderation of all the parties concerned in the negotiation. The Soviet leaders argue that there is no guarantee that a further agreement will be acceptable to the Western side, but we wonder, and we wonder sincerely, whether they can have any possible reason to believe that if the Soviet Union were to accept the Eisenhower plan, the West would be unwilling later on to agree to a scheme which would be generally satisfactory.

Everything, in fact, turns on confidence, everything turns on willingness to accept the fact that the other side is sincere and prepared to do what is necessary to bring about agreement. And that is again, as we see it, where the Eisenhower plan is so admirably fitted to the situation. It is essentially devised as a mark of confidence and as a means of promoting it.

Now, this is not to suggest that in its present form and in isolation from any other arrangements for disarmament, the plan should be implemented as such at once. But, it provides, in my view, a reasonable nucleus around which an initial and limited agreement could be developed and a most convenient approach to the solution of a problem which is so urgent and apparently otherwise intractable.

Now, although the situation is not without some encouraging features, I must stress in conclusion that we are still at the phase of plans and schemes, all of which require a great deal more development in detail. Such agreement as has been made between governments covers only parts of the various proposals advanced. We still face very serious scientific and technical obstacles which cast doubt on the possibility in present circumstances of effectively guaranteeing the observance of any scheme for the total prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. Progress in solving the disarmament problem must also be related to progress with respect to other major international problems since armaments are to a large extent a reflection as well as a cause in part of international tension.

As a member of the Sub-Committee, I can say that I have personally been encouraged by the spirit in which the representatives on the Disarmament Sub-Committee, or four others of them, have approached their task and I am confident that the hope which we all share for an agreement which would reduce the burden of armaments and lessen the threat of war, could be achieved if we are all determined and if we are prepared to dedicate our efforts.

My final observation is this: I cannot naturally interpret the intentions of the Soviet Union in this matter. I must say quite frankly that the request at this time to hold a meeting of this Commission in the light of the timetable ahead, in the light of the work of the General Assembly, in the light of the Foreign Ministers' meeting, is a difficult intention to assess. When we began our meetings on August 28, or thereabouts, I gathered, and I assume we all gathered, that there was a determination that our work in the Sub-Committee should not in any way impair the effectiveness of what was called the "spirit of Geneva", a spirit that was given to the world by the Heads of the four most powerful governments, perhaps, at the present time. Now, we will not gain in our common objectives if for some technical consideration anyone of our delegations moves against the temper and the manner which have characterized certainly the meetings of the Sub-Committee and all the meetings of the General Assembly since August 28. But we would not be true to the leadership of the Geneva spirit if, at this Assembly, now or later, for purely technical considerations, we moved this subject out of the real perspective of the meetings of Geneva. This problem has, by no means, been resolved and it will not be resolved unless this spirit is maintained. And it is with those thoughts in mind that I trust that all my colleagues at this table will approach our task in the light of the particular exigencies of the moment, in the light of our capacity to interpret the purposes and the intentions and the general indications of the interim report that is now before us. If we fail in this task, we will not only fail the spirit of Geneva, we will fail the people of the world all over, in every country, who are looking to us for constructive action.

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