

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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DISARMAMENT

Statement by the Hon. L.B. Pearson, Secretary of State for External Affairs and Chairman of the Canadian Delegation, in the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, January 21, 1957.

We are once again engaged in what must seem to many one of the most unrewarding activities of the United Nations, discussing ways and means of reducing arms in a climate of international fear, tension and insecurity. This climate is indeed, and the conditions which produced it, the main reason why, in spite of a rather bewildering array of proposals and counter-proposals, we are still far from our goal of agreement on the major steps of a substantial disarmament programme. I think, however, that we have made some progress to that goal.

There should be a special incentive for such progress in the realization that as the years go by without reaching agreement, the problem becomes more and more complicated and difficult, particularly with respect to the question of nuclear weapons. As the destructive power of these weapons increases and as the stockpiles grow, the obstacles in the way of an adequately safeguarded disarmament scheme are magnified. Nevertheless, our long, drawn-out negotiations on disarmament have been worthwhile. This persistent debate conducted in various bodies of the United Nations over the past ten years has at least ensured that the major powers have maintained steady contact on this subject and that world public opinion has been kept fully aware of the catastrophic consequences of the use of the arms we are trying to eliminate or reduce.

It is true that conflicting points of view have generally been held so tenaciously that by the time any particular agreement on disarmament seemed to be emerging, the underlying conditions have often been changed to such an extent that the problem has had to be faced again in different terms. For example, Mr. Moch, who has made such an outstanding personal contribution to this long search for security through disarmament, warned us repeatedly in the past that unless agreement was soon attained it would become virtually impossible to devise a control system adequate to allow a secure and safeguarded prohibition of atomic weapons.

And now we have reached the point - if not of no return, at least of no return to the possibility of accounting accurately for past production of nuclear weapons material, and of bringing it under international control.

However, I repeat that there has been some progress. On certain fundamentally important matters of principle the position of the major powers concerned is now less opposed. I have in mind, for example, the fact that the Soviet Government no longer calls for unconditional preliminary banning of nuclear weapons, but recognizes that measures of nuclear disarmament must be related to measures of conventional disarmament. There has also been a lessening of the differences of view as to the levels of forces of the great powers.

On the crucial matter of adequate and effective inspection and control of disarmament measures, the absolutely indispensable condition to an acceptable disarmament agreement, there has likewise been some progress. As a result of the discussions of the past year it is now, for the first time, possible to say that there is general agreement that the international control organization should have representatives established in the territory of the states concerned before disarmament actually begins, and that these control officials should remain in place throughout the duration of such disarmament agreement. In its latest proposals, the Soviet Delegation has also apparently accepted at least the principle of aerial inspection as one of the attributes of the control organization. While it is true that this reference to aerial inspection is by no means without limitations and conditions, we certainly welcome the fact that the Soviet Government has at least agreed, even if only in principle, to such inspection.

It is also my impression that in the last year or so there has been a growing realism in disarmament discussions. There has been considerably less tendency to advance proposals which, like the unconditional banning of the bomb, were recognized even by their advocates as quite unacceptable to other powers involved and were put forward for purposes which had little to do with disarmament or security. I think it is also increasingly recognized and accepted that disarmament measures must contribute to the security of the major powers concerned, and must not weaken the defensive position of one country relative to another. Governments must take very seriously their primary duty to defend their own people, and they must be convinced that disarmament measures are satisfactory from this point of view.

Turning now to the present discussion in the Political Committee, I should like first of all to welcome the moderately worded, businesslike and hopeful statement with which the distinguished representative of the United States opened the debate. I do not wish, at the present time, to go into the detail of the proposals of the United States, although I do wish to welcome this latest contribution to our negotiations.

As Mr. Lodge pointed out, further details of these proposals will be developed in the sub-committee, and I would comment now that it seems to the Canadian delegation that this new presentation of United States proposals is a valuable step forward in the process of negotiation. As we understand it this is not a rigid, detailed programme of disarmament; it is rather, a broad outline of the present United States position, realistically stated in the light of all the present conditions, and intended as a basis for further negotiation.

The dismal contrast between this opening United States statement and the intervention immediately afterwards by the distinguished representative of the U.S.S.R. must have been painfully apparent to everyone. Mr. Kuznetsov devoted nearly half of his statement to an intemperate and irrelevant attack on the policies of certain governments, notably that of the United States. It is very much to be regretted that the Soviet Government thought it necessary or wise to initiate the disarmament debate in a way which made it difficult to conclude that that Government had any immediate serious intentions to co-operate constructively in this matter. The chances for fruitful progress were damaged by this Soviet verbal assault, but the subject is one of such vital importance that we must, nevertheless, not be deterred by it from continuing our negotiations and discussions.

That portion of the Soviet statement which did deal with disarmament was, in the main, based directly on the latest proposals of the U.S.S.R. which were circulated on November 17, at a time when the attention of the world was focused more on the use by the U.S.S.R. of its arms to crush Hungarian patriots, than on Soviet proposals for disarmament.

As my Delegation indicated in the general debate at the opening of this Session of the General Assembly, we are prepared to give careful and objective consideration to the latest Soviet proposals. I have already indicated that, so far as it goes, we welcome the new Soviet position on aerial inspection, even though the particular limited application of aerial photography proposed by the U.S.S.R. may involve some serious difficulties, including the implication of the continued division of Germany. The Soviet Government also continues to propose the complete prohibition of nuclear weapons in spite of the fact that according to an explicit statement of the Soviet Delegation itself, it is not, at the present time, technically possible to devise any adequate system for inspecting such a prohibition. Incidentally in view of Soviet attacks on the pacific intentions and the good faith of Western powers, their confidence in the willingness of those powers to make effective such an unconditional, uncontrollable prohibition is as surprising as it is unconvincing.

We have also noted with interest the statement on January 15 of the distinguished representative of the United Kingdom, who indicated that while his Government stands by the comprehensive Anglo-French plan, it is also prepared to consider measures of partial disarmament as a first step to enable disarmament to get underway.

The distinguished representative of Yugoslavia reiterated in his statement the view of his Government that pending agreement on general disarmament we should seek early agreement and implementation of such initial measures as are now feasible. This is a point of view which has been advanced with some frequency in the last year or so and I believe that it has considerable merit. While disarmament cannot be dissociated from other international political problems which we face, it is true that large scale armaments are themselves an important source of international tension, particularly in view of the terrible destructiveness of modern nuclear weapons. I therefore agree that some start towards disarmament, however limited, might well have a salutary effect both on the international situation and the prospects of further disarmament.

We are certainly not all in agreement, Mr. Chairman, on the substance of our disarmament programme. Nevertheless, I am sure we all agree that the United Nations must carry on with its negotiations for such an agreed programme. We shall therefore shortly have before us a draft resolution, jointly sponsored by a group of countries including Australia, Canada, El Salvador, France, India, Japan, Norway, United Kingdom, United States and Yugoslavia.

This resolution does not seek to impose on any government, any policy or programme with which it is unable to agree. It is based on a realistic acceptance of the fact that disarmament can be achieved only by negotiations and willing agreement. It cannot be legislated or imposed, however impressive the majority in votes may be for any particular plan.

The resolution which I recommend to the Committee, therefore, does not discriminate against any particular proposals in favour of others. It commits us only to renew the negotiations in the established United Nations disarmament bodies, and to carry them forward with persistence and good faith. It embraces all the proposals which have been made since the 10th session of the General Assembly, whether here in the Assembly or in the Disarmament Commission or its sub-committee, and a report, by a stated time, to the Commission which will then, of course, report back to this Assembly.

I trust, Mr. Chairman, that this resolution will receive overwhelming support; indeed that it will be unanimously adopted. This would give us the best possible basis on which to continue the desperately urgent effort to reduce the arms burden, and, eventually, we hope, to eliminate the terrible threat of thermonuclear war.

I now wish to turn to one particular aspect of the armament question which has become a cause of considerable concern and anxiety to many people. I refer to the effects of atomic radiation and particularly to the possible consequences of nuclear test explosions. In his statement in the general debate at the beginning of this session of the Assembly, the Foreign Minister of Norway proposed that there should be established some system of United Nations registration of nuclear test explosions. In the present debate in the Political Committee we have heard with serious concern and with sympathy the moving remarks of the distinguished representative of Japan. The representative of the United Kingdom also touched on this matter. He suggested that the disarmament sub-committee investigate the possibility of agreeing on the limitation of nuclear test explosions either as part of a disarmament plan or separately. We also have before us the proposal tabled by the representative of the U.S.S.R. calling for a cessation of tests of these weapons.

The Canadian Delegation included some comments on this question in our statement in Plenary in the general debate on December 5, and our position remains as set forth in that statement. While it may not be realistic to propose an immediate ban on all such tests, nevertheless we are of the opinion, after weighing the best scientific evidence available to us - which is by no means complete or conclusive - that the United Nations must give close and serious consideration to the whole question of nuclear tests. Last year the General Assembly established a scientific committee on the effects of atomic radiation, the duty of which is to keep under close observation the whole problem of the levels of radiation and possible effects on man and his environment. We look to this committee, as it accumulates the data supplied to it and makes its analysis and assessments, to serve an important role. It could be the source of objective and valid scientific conclusions which could aid all concerned in avoiding decisions or action which might prove harmful.

In any agreement on nuclear tests we must be guided by two considerations: first, the necessity of securing authoritative, accurate information on the effects of such tests, scientifically and objectively determined; and second, the requirement to give reasonable satisfaction to the needs of defence in a dangerously divided world!

In our earlier statement to the Assembly, which I have mentioned, we expressed the hope that the countries concerned might be able to agree on some annual or periodic limit on the volume of radioactivity to be generated by test explosions. One of the recommendations of the proposed draft resolution of which I have just spoken is that the Disarmament Commission and its sub-committee give prompt attention to the whole problem of measures for cessation or limitation of nuclear test explosions.

There is, however, a further draft resolution before the committee which deals only with the question of advance registration of nuclear test explosions, that is to say, with the proposal made in Plenary by the Foreign Minister of Norway. This resolution stands in the name of Norway as well as of Japan and Canada.

The proposal incorporated in this resolution is inspired by a belief that it may be better to do now what is possible and feasible with respect to nuclear test explosions, rather than to do nothing at all because it is not possible to take more far-reaching action. If a proposal of this kind can be worked out, we would, for the first time, have moved, if only one step, away from dead centre on this whole problem.

Our resolution recommends that urgent attention be given to establishing, as a preliminary step, a system for registration with the United Nations of nuclear test explosions. The resolution also requests the Secretary-General and the Radiation Committee to co-operate with the states concerned in this registration system with a view to keeping under constant observation the world situation regarding present and expected radiation. This would, I repeat, be only a preliminary step, but I am certain it would be an important preliminary step and I hope that it too will be given most serious consideration.

In conclusion, I hope that all the proposals that have been submitted to this Committee will be referred for early and effective action to the United Nations Commission which has been set up for that purpose.

I do not need to emphasize to this Committee the gravity of the problem. Man has now developed weapons capable of his own complete destruction.

If he does not bring and keep them under control and, even more important, bring about a state of affairs where their use would be unthinkable and impossible, then life on this planet will indeed soon become--in the words of the English philosopher "nasty, brutish and short".

S/C