Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

Mid-Term Perspective for Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

(Vienna Hofburg Palace, 8 – 9 December 2014)

Message from Mohamed ElBaradei

Dear Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz,

I wish you and the participants at the Vienna Conference, a successful and productive discussion on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Please find below some reflections on the subject that I raised at my recent McNamara Lecture at Harvard University which you may find relevant. Durable peace remains a quest that humanity continues to grapple with without success. Peace remains elusive and force and violence remain the primary choice to settle differences.

Violence continues to ravage our planet: senseless, destructive, dehumanizing conflicts. What is worse, due to the annihilating weapons at our disposal, there is an increasing danger of sleep walking into self-destruction.
Our policies and international institutions are still designed for times past. The latter are highly polarized and increasingly paralyzed. They suffer from structural deficiencies and lack of authority and resources. One result is a dysfunctional system of collective security. We are steadily facing a crisis of global governance.

As we look at the war machinery at our disposal. Nuclear weapons loom large as a legacy of the cold war. But a quarter of a century after the end of that war, it borders on insanity that we still have more than 16,000 nuclear weapons and around 2,000 of them on alert. The abolition of nuclear weapons is alarmingly, no longer a fashionable topic since the conclusion of New START in 2011.

Yet it is evident that with nuclear weapons technology out of the box, and as long as some countries choose to rely on nuclear weapons, directly or through bilateral or multilateral alliances such as NATO, others will eventually seek to acquire them. A security concept based on “some are more equal than others”, and on a system of deterrence that is irrelevant to extremists with no return address, is unsustainable and almost naïve. It raises the question of how long the center of the non-proliferation regime can hold, in places like the Middle East, East Asia and other areas of potential conflicts; or for how long we can live with a patchy
nuclear verification regime that gives the IAEA uneven and often limited authority. More ominously, how long it will take before a terrorist group lays its hands on a nuclear weapon? It is of course imperative that no more countries acquire nuclear weapons. But to that end it is equally imperative that the Weapon States divest themselves of these weapons.

Under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Weapon States not only have an obligation to negotiate in good faith towards nuclear disarmament, but equally in the words of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) “the obligation to achieve a precise result: nuclear disarmament in all its aspects”. However, after more than four decades of undertaking these obligations, nuclear-weapon states are moving in the opposite direction. Nuclear weapon modernization programmes continue and will assure that these inhumane weapons will haunt us until the end of the century.

In 2009, President Obama made a clear commitment “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”, and to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in (US) national security strategy”. Yet, in 2014 the US is planning to spend up to a trillion dollars to modernize its nuclear weapons arsenal. This is very troubling.
Almost all prominent strategic experts have argued strongly that reliance on nuclear weapons is becoming “increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective”.

President Obama emphasized the danger: “one nuclear weapon exploded in one city … no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences may be ... ultimately for our survival”. In his summary, the chairman of the Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons held in Mexico earlier this year, with the participation of 146 states but with the significant absence of all the weapon states party to the NPT, stated “Today the risk of nuclear weapons use is growing globally”. He went on to say “as more countries deploy more nuclear weapons on higher levels of combat readiness, the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional use of these weapons grow significantly”. The third such Conference is being held in Vienna on 8-9 December 2014. While the United States has indicated its intention to attend it is not clear whether the other Weapon States will do so as well.

But with all these forewarnings, have we put our money where our mouths are? Have we seriously tried to drastically reduce the number of weapons in existence when no limit was set under the New START on the number of operationally inactive nuclear warheads?
Have we seriously tried to alter the nuclear launch warning systems? Have we seriously tried to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons in national security strategy? Have we seriously started thinking about the security architecture in a nuclear-weapon free world, including the need to deter and defeat possible cheats? This, in my view, is a dismal record and raises the question whether our commitment to nuclear disarmament is genuine.

War and peace, like many human conditions, are of our own creation. It depends on the environment we construct and the mindset we cultivate. What we need is an environment based on equity, trust, mutual respect and dialogue and not on double standards, polarization, humiliation and dictates. And it should be a mindset that understands that in our globalized world we will either succeed together or fail separately. If we work on eliminating the drivers of insecurity and war, the odds are we will be able to avert or at least mitigate most wars. If we work on the drivers of peace, the odds are we will be able to restore our rationality and understand that we are the same human species, irrespective of our superficial differences of race, religion, language or ethnicity, and that we increasingly share the same core values and life on Earth. If we maintain the status quo and the same mindset, maybe we will be able to travel to Mars, but we will continue to
kill each other, and one day, I shudder to think, we might see Rajeev Gandhi’s warning in 1998 coming true - when India was hoping for a world free from nuclear weapons - that a nuclear war will mean “the end of life as we know it on our planet Earth”. Later in his life, Robert McNamara had the courage to take a stand against his own conduct during the Vietnam War: “We were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why ...how much evil must we do in order to do good”? These words should be our starting point. Anything less will not do.

I wish you every success in your endeavours to strengthen the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime and to contribute to the growing momentum to firmly anchor the humanitarian imperative in all global efforts dealing with reducing nuclear weapons to achieve nuclear disarmament.

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