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Swiss Embassy news

Speech held by Swiss Ambassador Marion Weichelt Krupski on the occasion of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) New Zealand Section at the New Zealand Parliament (Beehive), July 18, 2012.

Nuclear disarmament/humanitarian dimension

Madam Chair, Mr Co-Chair, Members of Parliament, Honorary Consul of Norway, Alyn Ware and Mayra Gomez,

Still too many nuclear weapons exist; progress on nuclear disarmament has been slow. If we want to move ahead, if we want to make more significant progress in nuclear disarmament, we have to shift gears and increase our efforts. Switzerland is deeply convinced that the time is ripe to delegitimize nuclear weapons.

To achieve this goal, the traditional arms control paradigm has to evolve. It has only partially delivered the results we want. In fact, the traditional approach is to a large extent responsible for the deadlock that we are facing in multilateral disarmament. If we want to succeed, we have to take into account new aspects and new actors. We believe there are two particularly promising avenues:

- the legal aspect which addresses the question of the legality of nuclear weapons, and
- the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons

A) Legal Aspects

In Switzerland's view, nuclear weapons are illegal by their very nature.

International humanitarian law states that any attack

- must be proportionate,
- must respect the principle of precaution,
- must not be directed at civilians or civilian objects,
- must be carried out in a manner that makes it possible to distinguish between military objectives and civilians,
- must not cause unnecessary or aggravated suffering,
- must not cause severe, widespread or long-term damage to the environment.

The use of nuclear weapons would violate all these core principles of international humanitarian law. Switzerland cannot see how any use of nuclear weapons could ever be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law.

Nuclear weapons, just as any other weapon that cannot be used in accordance with IHL must therefore be banned and eliminated.

The legal discussion on the compatibility of nuclear weapons with international humanitarian law is very important and must be debated. But arguing solely on a legal basis will probably not be good enough. Too often legal debates end in differing legal opinions. This is not what is needed.

What we need is a comprehensive approach. A comprehensive approach with a focus on the consequences of a nuclear attack, a focus on the humanitarian impact of the use of nuclear weapons.

B) Humanitarian Consequences

It is crucial to understand the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. We need to look at nuclear weapons for what they are:

- Nuclear weapons have the capacity to kill millions, possibly even billions of people.
- The effects of the use of nuclear weapons are uncontrollable both in space and time.
- Nuclear weapons can cause widespread, severe and long term damages to the life on our planet.
- These effects are unacceptable under elementary considerations of humanity, and this is why nuclear weapons need to be outlawed and eliminated. They shall never be used again, under any circumstances.

Switzerland is not on its own with its view. When Switzerland took the floor during the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Non Proliferation Review Conference on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament, it did so on behalf of 15 other states, amongst them New Zealand. It was a forceful demonstration that a growing number of actors are very concerned about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. We have indeed had very positive feedback, both in the conference room as well as from civil society.

Changing the debate, shifting perspectives and mobilizing civil society has been essential to outlaw other weapons. It can and has to be repeated: Human security has to be put again at the forefront of our agenda to stigmatize and eliminate these profoundly inhumane weapons.

New Zealand has always been an important partner in disarmament. Our two countries work very closely together at the United Nations in Geneva and in New York; not only on nuclear disarmament, but on a wide range of issues across the spectrum of disarmament (like the revitalizing of the disarmament machinery, cluster munitions, mines, biological weapons, etc.). New Zealand is a key supporter of highlighting the humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.

It is crucial to have reliable partners like New Zealand and we commend New Zealand for its commitment. We particularly commend the New Zealand parliament for unanimously adopting a resolution highlighting the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons.

Switzerland will continue to stress the humanitarian dimension of nuclear weapons and bring this issue forward together with all our partners. A conference organised by Norway on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in 2013 will be an important event to improve our understanding and to further raise awareness. We welcome the New Zealand's parliament's call on the New Zealand government to support the Norwegian conference on this issue.

Together we can make a difference.

For further information on Switzerland's recent engagement on this matter with the United Nations, please refer to www.swissinfo.ch (6 Dec 2012).