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Second session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, 22 April – 3 May 2013, Geneva

Remarks by Under-Secretary of State Jaakko Laajava, facilitator for the Conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to address this audience in my capacity as the facilitator for the Conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction. In accordance with my mandate, contained in the Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference, I have also submitted my report in writing.

The report discusses the steps taken since the first Preparatory Committee of the 2015 NPT Review Conference towards the convening of the Helsinki Conference and the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The report also outlines my thinking on the next steps that need to be taken to that end.

My intention here is not to talk about the continued violence and instability in parts of the region, but I am of course speaking against the backdrop of the worrying situation on the ground. This in itself highlights the need to make urgent progress towards a Middle East free of all weapons of mass destruction.

I would like to complement my written report with some additional remarks but first let me offer some words of thanks.

I would like to thank all States of the region for their support of my work and their constructive engagement in the consultation process. I would also like to thank them for their generous hospitality during my team's visits to the region. We look forward to continuing the excellent cooperation with the States of the region in the same spirit as until now.

The cooperation between the conveners – the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States – and the facilitator has remained excellent. We meet on regular basis to exchange views on the current situation and the way forward. I wish to thank the conveners for their continued efforts and support.

Equally, the entire NPT community has demonstrated strong support for the work of the facilitator throughout the past eighteen months, for which I am very grateful. I am aware of the fact that very many countries outside the region wish to see progress in this important endeavor.

I also take this opportunity to thank the relevant international organizations for having provided background documentation to the Conference. This is valuable for our work now and in the months to come.

During the past months, numerous academic institutions and think-tanks have organized events in support of regional dialogue on the Conference. There is considerable expertise available for the Governments on all related issues. For example, identifying possible confidence building measures has been a topic at many events. I wish to thank the organizers for their efforts and look forward to cooperating with various civil society actors in the future. The role of civil society in this process is indispensable.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Last year I had the pleasure to report to you in Vienna. I had been the facilitator for seven months, and was able to report on the steps taken and the progress made thus far. One year has since passed, with plenty of activities and developments behind us. To illustrate what kind of intensity we are talking about perhaps some numbers are in order.

Since my appointment in October 2011, my team and I have carried out over 300 rounds of various discussions with the States of the region, the conveners, the nuclear-weapon States, other States, relevant international organizations, civil society, academia and think-tanks, and other relevant actors in support of the implementation of the 1995 Resolution as well as undertaking preparations for the convening of the Conference. The majority of these talks has taken place with regional stakeholders.

These contacts have helped narrow the existing gaps and bring partners closer to a joint understanding. We have received valuable input in various forms from all corners of the Middle East. Among us in this chamber I wish to acknowledge the input by the League of Arab States, i.a., in the form of a non-paper covering all issues related to the Conference.

A significant amount of preparatory work for the Conference has already been done. I have listened to the views of the States of the region and conveyed my own ideas regarding the Conference to them, seeking to bridge the varying points of departure.

I firmly believe that a sustainable process towards the zone requires a very well functioning cooperation between all partners. We are talking about a hugely ambitious endeavor covering nuclear weapons, chemical weapons and biological weapons and their means of delivery. Such level of cooperation can hardly be achieved without mutual trust and the necessary level of confidence between the partners. Their political dialogue and mutual engagement are essential for advances in the zone. Similarly, advances in arms control will also increase confidence and promote the political process.

We have suggested that the Conference itself would be relatively brief with the aim of reaffirming the common objective of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East and identifying follow-on steps seeking to make progress to that end. In our view, the ensuing regional cooperation and expert level work would then need to occur both within the arms control domain and in the area of confidence-building for the process to be sustainable. I have sought to reflect these elements in my proposals for the Conference arrangements, including in my non-papers on the agenda, modalities and rules of procedure for the Conference, that I shared with the States of the region in October last year.

Mr. Chairman,

As the end of 2012 was approaching, it became apparent that the time left was not sufficient to conclude preparations so as to secure arrangements freely arrived at by the States of the region and to ensure the participation of all of them. The postponement of the conference was very unfortunate, and I believe we all share the same disappointment.

Nevertheless, all States of the Middle East have expressed their willingness to continue the preparations for the Conference. This is important, as we are in fact and in spite of the remaining challenges closer to the convening of the Conference than ever before. This is something to keep in mind as the broader perspective.

The conveners of the Conference have repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to the convening the Conference as soon as possible, as well as their continued support for the vision of the Middle East zone free of all weapons of mass destruction. In fact, it is important to keep in mind that this vision is shared by us all, both inside and outside the region.

Like many times during the past months, I would again like to cite the wise words of our Chairman, Ambassador Feruta, who used an excellent expression when he said that “we might have missed a deadline, but we have not lost the opportunity”.

Mr. Chairman,

All of this reassures me that the international community wants the initiative to go forward and that the prospects for holding the Conference remain real. I for one intend to continue my work to that end with determination and vigor.

I will intensify my efforts to consult with all partners concerned, both bilaterally and in other formats, informally and more formally, including through silent diplomacy, as appropriate. My purpose remains to make progress towards the earliest possible convening of the Conference.

To that end and to sustain the momentum created in 2012, I proposed last November holding multilateral consultations as soon as possible. Their purpose was to secure arrangements for the Conference to be freely arrived at by the States of the region. Through these consultations, I hoped to take the process one step forward. Such consultations did not yet materialize. I do not want to dwell on the reasons why, because more important than to look in the rearview mirror is to look towards the future. More work is clearly needed, and I remain flexible and open to new ideas and fresh approaches.

As to the timing of the Conference, its arrangements having been freely arrived at by the States of the region, the Conference can then be convened without delay. To achieve this is the responsibility of us all, the States of the region, the conveners and the facilitator.

The conveners and I will make efforts in order that all relevant parties can be brought together for a constructive dialogue that advances the objective of the Middle East zone.

Willingness by the regional States to engage each other in a constructive spirit is essential before, during and after the Helsinki Conference.

Mr. Chairman,

While I understand that delegations want to highlight their disappointment regarding the postponement of the 2012 Conference I also look forward to a productive exchange of views here in Geneva. We should deal with this important issue with the far-sightedness it deserves.

Indeed, there is a risk that we focus on the negative and ignore the positive. In this, we might lose sight of the tremendous potential at hand to contribute to the stability and security in the Middle East. A potential that could perhaps transform into a vehicle enabling the partners to initiate a gradual change in the region from confrontation to cooperation. This would have important implications to wider interests of international peace, stability and security.

Sometimes, virtually intractable problems get solved, against all odds. The EU High Representative Catherine Ashton celebrated just a few days ago the agreement between the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Kosovo. She emphasized that brave leadership is vital if lasting change is to be achieved. The normal condition of politics is to exploit dividing lines and incite differences. The demand of peacemaking is to seek common ground and design a shared future. The task of leaders is to take risks and not be deterred by the difficulties ahead.

Thank you for your attention.