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First Committee: General debate

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Statement by Senator Chris Back, Parliament of Australia

(Check against delivery)

Mr Chairman,

May I congratulate you on your election as Chair of the First Committee during its 68th session. Australia is pleased to see you chairing this important Committee. You can be assured of my delegation's support.

Australia gives top priority to taking forward the non-proliferation and disarmament agenda. We are ready and willing to contribute innovatively to ensure the United Nations does not falter in realising its ambition for a more peaceful, stable and secure world. Not just for ourselves, but for future generations, and to hasten the day when humanity need no longer live under the threat of violence - whether by war, conflict or terrorism.

In this spirit, and among the many topics worthy of our attention, I will focus my comments today on some priority areas that warrant our concerted action.

Mr Chairman,

Events this year have graphically highlighted why we all harbour deep concern over the threat posed to global and regional peace and security by weapons of mass destruction. Australia has condemned in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons in Syria, including the attack in the Damascus suburbs on 21 August which killed many hundreds of people including children. This attack was a shocking violation of the long-established prohibition against the use of chemical weapons and it is imperative that those who committed this grave breach of international law are brought to justice.

With this in mind, Australia co-sponsored and welcomed the adoption by the Security Council of Resolution 2118 and the decision on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons by the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. These strengthen a fundamental norm of international relations: that the use of chemical weapons by anyone in any circumstances is abhorrent to humanity and

constitutes a serious breach of international law, and for the first time the Council determined that the use of chemical weapons anywhere constituted a threat to international peace and security. Australia supports the full and prompt implementation of these measures as mandated by the Council. We commend the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for their early efforts to ensure implementation. They are carrying out their tasks in the most difficult of circumstances and require strong support from the international community as they do so. We call on the Syrian authorities to cooperate unconditionally with the United Nations and the OPCW to ensure the complete, final, verifiable and enforceable destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, and all related materials and equipment.

Mr Chairman,

The past twelve months have been particularly productive in advancing global action on conventional weapons control, with inter alia the General Assembly's adoption on 2 April 2013 of the Arms Trade Treaty (of which Australia was a co-author) by an overwhelming majority of States. The Security Council's adoption on 26 September of the resolution put forward by Australia, to strengthen international action to combat the illicit trade and misuse of small arms and light weapons, was also a major milestone. Australia is honoured to have played a part in developing these initiatives; being among the early signatories of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and – in our capacity as Council President for the month of September 2013 – advancing the Security Council resolution on small arms and light weapons.

Now that the ATT has opened for signature, the international community must continue to maintain momentum behind the Treaty to achieve its earliest entry into force and effective implementation.

At this First Committee, Australia, together with the other ATT co-authors (Argentina, Costa Rica, Finland, Japan, Kenya and the United Kingdom) will present a resolution which promotes further signatures and ratifications of the Treaty and its early entry into force. We invite all Member States to support this resolution, which also calls on States in a position to do so to provide assistance to requesting States intending to become parties to the Treaty.

Australia encourages States wishing to assist with implementation of the ATT to contribute to the UN Trust Facility Supporting Cooperation on Arms Regulation (UNSCAR). UNSCAR will also provide a vehicle for assisting States to implement the United Nations Programme of Action to combat the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

Australia encourages continued momentum on universalisation of the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. Recognising the tragic impact on civilians of cluster munitions and anti-personnel mines, Australia urges continued harnessing of national and international assistance and cooperation, and further promotion of universalisation and full and effective implementation. We also look forward to the Third Review Conference of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, in Maputo, Mozambique in 2014, which will build upon progress made to date towards achieving a world free of landmines.

Mr Chairman,

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the cornerstone of the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. We must continue to reaffirm our support for the norms established by the Treaty. We must take credible steps to address the fact that nuclear weapons still exist 68 years after their only use in war. And we must acknowledge that progress on nuclear disarmament most readily occurs in an atmosphere of trust conducive to building the political will to turn away from nuclear weapons.

Nuclear disarmament expectations fall most heavily on the nuclear-weapon States. Australia welcomes the continued engagement of the nuclear-weapon States towards implementation of their disarmament commitments made or reaffirmed in 2010. Reporting nuclear disarmament progress remains a particular challenge. A stronger culture of transparency and accountability is crucial. To this end, Australia and other members of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative have sought to engage the nuclear-weapon States on transparency and reporting.

There are clearly gaps in the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime; we acknowledge them and much of our effort is aimed at addressing them. But this also means regional initiatives are a crucial complementary focus; they can strengthen global efforts, but they can also address specific regional concerns and insecurities. Nowhere is this more relevant, and urgent, than in the Middle East. Australia strongly supports the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, and on-going efforts to convene a conference at the earliest opportunity. We call upon all States in the Middle East to engage in a spirit of genuine and constructive cooperation to make this happen.

Entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) remains a priority. The nuclear test moratorium needs strengthening to prevent slipping back to a time of nuclear tests. The CTBT is more than a practical commitment not to test nuclear weapons; it is symbolic of a broader undertaking to prevent the further development of them. Australia calls on nuclear weapon possessors and other Annex II countries that have not yet ratified to do so.

The discussions at the Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in Oslo this year, in which Australia participated, illustrated once more the devastating immediate and long-term humanitarian effects of a nuclear weapon detonation. This is why we strive to realise the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, including through implementation of the 2010 NPT Action Plan.

In the meantime, we must bring to a halt additions to nuclear weapons, and indeed reverse the quantity of them. The need for a treaty banning production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and other nuclear explosive devices has long been recognised by the General Assembly, but a start to negotiations is long overdue. The Conference on Disarmament (CD) needs to get back to work. Australia has been doing its part to break the impasse through participation in the open-ended working group on taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations. The Group of Governmental Experts to make recommendations on possible aspects of a long-overdue Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty

(FMCT) will also help take the 2010 Review Conference agenda forward and bring fresh impetus to the work of the CD.

Mr Chairman,

New security challenges move ahead of us, for example in Cyberspace. We welcome the consensus report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (A/68/98), which Australia was honoured to chair. The recommendation, on norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviour by States – that “international law, and in particular the Charter of the United Nations, is applicable” – is an important breakthrough. It provides a fundamental principle on which to build the process of elaborating rules applying to State behaviour in Cyberspace.

Mr Chairman,

The challenges we face do not remain static. Once termed an ‘emerging security issue’, Space Security is now squarely in the international security frame. The consensus report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in Outer Space Activities (A/68/189) outlines how closer coordination and consultation between States can reduce misperception and miscalculation in space. These measures, with the Group of Governmental Experts’ reaffirmation of the existing legal framework pertaining to outer space, will contribute to building trust among space actors and space users alike, thus enhancing international security. To this end, Australia welcomes the European Union’s continuing efforts to engage the international community on the preparation of a draft international code of conduct for outer space activities.

Mr Chairman,

The thematic discussions over the coming weeks provide an opportunity for us all to engage substantively to take the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda forward.

Throughout your leadership, I hope our collective focus is on practical outcomes for the benefit of the international community and, most importantly, humanity.