Statement of the Netherlands
delivered by
H.E. Mr. Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
at
The Conference on Disarmament
On
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'It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.' Charles Dickens’ famous first line illuminates the dual reality of life in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, his words aptly describe the current state of world affairs.

For starters, 75 years of multilateralism: a marvellous invention that allows the countries of the world to communicate with words, not guns. And these 75 years of global teamwork have yielded many other accomplishments as well. 50 years of commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And more than 40 years of valuable work by the Conference on Disarmament, resulting for example in the Chemical Weapons Convention and Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

These milestones show that the Conference on Disarmament is a truly multilateral forum, where many countries confer and try to move disarmament forward through dialogue and action. They have been important, brave decisions. Moments in history when we managed to surpass ourselves. Not just by making the right decisions, but also by upholding those decisions and carrying on with our efforts.

Unfortunately, Mr President, there have also been a lot of disappointments. Five years ago, the NPT Review Conference ended with no plan of action. The final communiqué was rejected, after four weeks of frustrating debate. Two years ago, the US withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran. Since then, Iran has been moving in the wrong direction, away from the accord. A year ago the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was abandoned, following several violations by Russia. Also last year, the United States ‘unsigned’ the Arms Trade Treaty.

At all these moments, we proved unable to surpass ourselves. Debate and dialogue stalled. And even more worrisome, the world became less secure. North Korea has been expanding its nuclear weapons programme. The Indian and Pakistani armed forces have frequently been on high alert. Several countries have been entertaining the idea of developing a nuclear weapon. And there are serious tensions in the Middle East. UN Secretary-General António Guterres once described the INF as an ‘invaluable brake on nuclear war’. Yet right now the brakes seem to be off. We find ourselves in a reckless street race with fewer and fewer rules and no brakes. This isn’t mere rhetorical exaggeration. If the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is also allowed to expire, the two largest nuclear powers will not be bound by any rules or regulations. There will be no brakes.

Mr President,
This is the difficult environment in which we diplomats and negotiators have to do our work. It’s a real challenge. But we cannot blame circumstances for our failure to deliver. Not here, in this forum. Nor in any other forum. We all know that our discussions here are important. But we also know that they can be frustrating and slow. And that procedural arguments are used to block progress on substantive issues, like the negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. In order to move forward, sometimes you need to step back. Take stock. Rethink.
That is why the Netherlands submitted its ‘Back to Basics’ working paper. To take a step back. Take stock. And rethink how we organise the work of this Conference. We hope to build on and expand the momentum this paper has created. And we need to deliver elsewhere, too.

In less than two months’ time, the tenth NPT Review Conference will take place in New York. This is a crucial forum for new proposals and ideas. It’s a place to lobby for new initiatives, to move towards a world free of nuclear weapons. I cannot overstate the importance of this conference. Every five years it gives us the chance to make the right decisions for our future and safeguard our survival.

We only have one global treaty banning the proliferation of nuclear weapons. There is no alternative. The NPT is the only treaty with a legally binding commitment requiring nuclear-weapon states to pursue negotiations on disarmament.

Albert Einstein said, ‘Humans invented the atom bomb but no mouse in the world would construct a mousetrap.’ The atom bomb an invention we cannot ‘undo’. We can only prevent ourselves getting caught in the trap. So at the conference, we need to make the right decisions. Simply saying ‘the meeting is the message’ is not enough. The Review Conference has to be a success. This requires ambitious realism. We won’t reach the finish line this year by any means, but we cannot settle for the status quo. We need to make progress. On many fronts. For example, we must demand that the nuclear-weapon states take action to implement NPT Article VI. Yet Article VI cannot be implemented without an operational Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), as well as work on nuclear disarmament verification.

Likewise, non-proliferation obligations cannot be met without IAEA safeguards and functioning export controls. And in order to make progress, we need to take responsibility. Especially the countries with nuclear weapons. And non-nuclear-weapon states must play a leading role too. By participating at high political level. I will go to New York myself, and I hope my counterparts will do the same. As chair of Main Committee III and a member of the Chairs’ bureau, the Netherlands will do its utmost to help make the review conference a success. We will also continue working to make the NPT proceedings inclusive and transparent. We are all responsible for NPT, and it benefits us all.

That’s why the Netherlands started organising regional NPT meetings in 2016.

Mr President,
In order to make progress, we also need to look to the future. And not only at the review conference. As we face these best and worst of times, technological development poses new dilemmas and challenges. We are living in a new dual reality. A reality where new technology can make the world a better place and a more dangerous one. It can be a force for good, for all humankind.... Or a means of destruction, in which the human element has purposely been diminished or even removed. A new mousetrap.

Artificial intelligence poses one such dilemma. Greater speed in data processing, facilitated by artificial intelligence, could have great military benefits. But it could also dangerously reduce decision-making time. In the same vein, increasing automated functions could reduce the risk of human error. But operators still need to be able to understand how the systems
they are using work. While we don’t know the exact implications of new technologies, we need to discuss their impact. So we can maximise the potential of human-machine interaction as a force for good, while preventing its use for evil. Right now, we have the power to prevent the creation of new mousetraps. And right now, we have the power to write our own story of a better future. In my view, certain things are non-negotiable. A human element must play a role in any weapon system. And compliance with international law is crucial.

Mr President,
A couple of weeks ago, a heavy storm battered the Netherlands. Ciara. The first Dutch storm with a name. The press all over the world marvelled at the ‘Dutch riders in the storm’: cyclists taking part in the Dutch Headwind Cycling Championships. On a bike without gears or frills, in gale-force winds and nowhere to shelter. 8.5 kilometres long. Perhaps you have to be ‘really Dutch’ – and really crazy – to enter this competition. As one rider said: ‘It’s like climbing a 10% slope on the worst bike you can imagine.’ That’s quite a challenge. But I know a sport that is even more demanding: long-distance running. I know this from experience.

Nuclear disarmament is not a sprint. It’s a marathon. One that began 75 years ago and is far from over. In the Netherlands, the wind died down many days ago and the crazy Dutch cyclists have long since recovered. But our marathon will continue for decades to come. Despite the headwinds we face, it’s important for us to keep running. And in the right direction. Even when the finish line is nowhere in sight. Even when we feel exhausted. Even when we’re discouraged by the resistance to our efforts. Because if we give up, we won’t get anywhere.

Thank you.