

UNIDIR 25th Anniversary Debate

“Human security should be the fundamental basis for multilateral disarmament and arms control negotiations”

23 November 2005

Council Chamber, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Introduction

Humanitarian and disarmament efforts are often closely linked. Armed conflict can have dire humanitarian consequences.

For several years, as part of its work, UNIDIR has been rethinking the relationship between multilateral negotiations in disarmament and arms control and humanitarian action. In 2003, with generous assistance from the Governments of Norway and The Netherlands, UNIDIR began a research project entitled “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: Making Multilateral Negotiations Work”. Based on the recognition that a greater humanitarian focus is relevant to disarmament and arms control processes, the project is concerned with developing practical proposals on how humanitarian perspectives can be applied in functional terms to assist negotiators.

To commence its 25th anniversary year, UNIDIR hosted a high-level debate on 23 November 2005 in the Council Chamber of the Palais des Nations in Geneva. Around 150 people, from diplomatic Missions, UN and other international agencies, representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), researchers, media and members of the general public attended. The event was supported by Norway.

The motion contested in the debate was that “Human security should be the fundamental basis for multilateral disarmament and arms control negotiations”. Proposing the motion were Dr. Helga Hernes, former State Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Norway and Ms. Jody Williams, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1997) and Campaign Ambassador for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). Opposing the motion were Prof. Brahma Chellaney of the Indian Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi and Prof. Gerald Steinberg, Director of the Interdisciplinary Program on Conflict Management and Negotiations at Bar Ilan University in Israel. A discussion, including views from the floor, ensued after the speakers and a vote was taken on the motion involving all of those attending.

The views that were expressed by speakers are their sole responsibility and were made in the spirit of debate. They do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the United Nations, UNIDIR (including the “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action” project), UNIDIR staff members or sponsors.

Opening remarks by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

Mr. Ordzhonikidze emphasized that disarmament efforts are of first importance and, as such, have been a priority for the United Nations since its establishment. Disarmament and non-proliferation undertakings have potential benefit for individuals and their communities at the political, military, economic and social levels. Mr. Ordzhonikidze also stressed the importance of UNIDIR’s ongoing efforts to promote disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control and its contribution to the thinking of new approaches to international security.

Dr. Helga Hernes

Dr. Hernes’ view of human security focused on violence and its consequences in terms of loss of human life. Since the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of security—through low intensity conflicts, civil wars, internal wars and a variety of transnational organized criminal activities—has cost millions of lives, predominantly among civilians. Violence has severe impacts, especially on women and children, and security problems are even more acute in refugee camps, which are commonly the scene of large-scale rapes, forced prostitution and other abuses. This highlights the need for the international community to put the consequences of armed conflict for civilians at the core of its thinking about disarmament, rather than insisting it stay at the periphery. It also underlines the necessity of promoting women’s participation and representation in decision-making positions. Dr. Hernes argued that the way the international community addresses current security issues is highly unsatisfactory. The demonstrated ineffectiveness of multilateral negotiations in disarmament and arms control over the last decade, except for those areas, such as anti-personnel mines, in which human security approaches have been inculcated, supports the need for negotiating processes to be reframed. In this respect, Dr. Hernes expressed her support for UNIDIR’s “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: Making Multilateral Negotiations Work” project.

Prof. Brahma Chellaney

Prof. Chellaney argued that the debate’s motion assumes a relationship between human security and disarmament that does not, in fact, exist. In a Hobbesian world without central authority, every state needs the capacity to defend itself and its citizens. Without this ability, human security is merely a nice—but abstract—idea. Moreover, the meaning of human security differs from one person to another and this lack of an uncontroversial definition, Prof. Chellaney argued, is a major weakness of the concept. He also contended that the standing of a nation in the world is not determined by its level of human security, but by its military power. “Human security”, as a concept, is promoted by rich countries, which nevertheless maintain their high security standards by investing

heavily in traditional forms of security, such as military defence (e.g. US\$12 billion per annum in Canada, 38 billion in Germany and 52 billion in France). Trans-border challenges—like environmental degradation, refugee flows and human rights considerations in general—are essential human security issues that need to be addressed as such. But, human security has its limits and it is not reasonable to promote this concept as a new security paradigm. Prof. Chellaney agreed that traditional negotiating instruments have experienced limited success in dealing with real world challenges such as terrorism. However, human security approaches should not drive disarmament and arms control because they are not credible alternatives.

Ms. Jody Williams

Jody Williams agreed on the fact that states that are leaders at the economic level are those who are military dominant. However, economic dominance by one or a few actors over the rest of the world—20% of the people controlling 80% of the resources—has fuelled serious resentments, creating a propitious environment for violence. The example of the Roman Empire, Jody Williams argued, illustrates that the everlasting hegemony of one actor over all others is an unrealistic concept and that a different kind of leadership has to be envisaged. Even the most powerful State in the world is vulnerable in face of terrorist attacks, she argued, and increasing defence spending is not going to make them safer. This highlights the need for a global approach of security that takes into account equality, justice, understanding and tolerance. Human security, she said, boils down to enlightened self-interest. Jody Williams also denounced the simplistic view that “human security” is a utopian women’s concept in opposition with “national security” considered as a realistic and practical men’s solution. These two approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, she contended, but as complementary. She highlighted the necessity of increasing the representation of women at all decision-making levels in regional, national and international institutions, and stressed the need for taking a step out classical multilateral negotiations, which are driven, in her opinion, by the “tyranny of consensus”.

Prof. Gerald Steinberg

Prof. Steinberg disputed the capacity of the human security approach, as he termed it, to address security issues in a realistic and effective way. However worthy the moral objective of disarmament may be, human security approaches to arms control have serious limitations in practice, he argued. Some of the strongest proponents of human security as an alternative to traditional national-security driven perspectives in democratic countries—NGOs—are unelected and unaccountable to voters. It cannot be assumed that they are acting in the overall interests of the societies in which they operate. Prof Steinberg illustrated this point by recalling public opposition to rearmament and support for appeasement in the Western democracies in the 1920s and 1930s that delayed rearmament and the development of credible deterrent force against fascist aggression. The Second World War and the Holocaust resulted. Supporters of human security approaches—individuals and NGOs—can participate in public debate, Prof. Steinberg argued, but they have no moral authority to decide on matters of arms control. Prof. Steinberg contended that Hobbes’s depiction of the world, and the need for strong state authority remains an accurate picture of the world today. Under such circumstances, the

human security approach cannot replace the centrality of nation-states and the strategy of deterrence in determining arms control.

Open discussion

Various views from the floor were expressed on the need for a broader view of security. Human security and national security, some noted, are complementary elements and both can have utility. A common view put forward was that current approaches to disarmament and arms control are not effective on their own in tackling increasingly complex security problems. New and more effective ways to frame security challenges have to emerge. This was difficult when civil society voices were excluded to such a great extent in many disarmament forums at present, such as the Conference on Disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review process.

After open discussion there was a vote on the motion by means of a show of hands by all those present. The motion was carried by a large majority.