Extracts from a speech by Rt Hon Des Browne MP, UK Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne addresses the Conference on Disarmament,Geneva 5th Feb 2008

The UK's disarmamnet commitments are not just theoretical obligations. They are priorities against which we have made real progress since we came to power in 1997. The UK has a vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and, in partnership with everyone who shares that ambition, we intend to make further progress towards this vision in the coming years.

Problem

Over the past 15 years, we have seen some nations expanding their nuclear arsenals, some surreptitiously seeking nuclear weapons under the guise of a civil energy programme and others detonating nuclear test devices in the face of international condemnation.

The proliferation of nuclear material, technology, know-how and weapons represents a grave threat to international security. There remain many thousands of nuclear warheads around the world. We must take action now to ensure such material is properly protected.

We all want to see the world become a much safer place. International security architecture, in the form of Treaties and initiatives, exists to help us achieve that objective. The international community has been active in bolstering that architecture. It has not completely stopped proliferation. Nor is it yet strong enough to permit immediate unilateral disarmament by any recognised Nuclear Weapon State.

We need to do more.

But nuclear weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction are not the only concern, we must also maintain a focus on conventional weapons.

Last month, Prime Minister Gordon Brown set out the key challenges facing the international community. He highlighted some of the ways international institutions need to reform to enable us all, collectively, to meet those challenges. He reminded us that one person is killed every minute by a conventional weapon. Kofi Annan famously called them "WMD in slow motion".

These weapons have an enormous effect in terms of lost human lives, in terms of broken communities, environmental impact and damage to economic prosperity and development. I have witnessed their devastating impact on the lives of people in Central Africa, Colombia, Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Consequently, I am proud support efforts such as the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the UK's Arms Trade Treaty initiative. These efforts aim to contribute to a global control architecture which both meets the requirements of the 21st century and

gives focus and coherence to existing measures.

In addition, Gordon Brown and I have made clear our goal of securing an international instrument that bans those cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians. Last year I withdrew from service the two types of cluster munitions for exactly this reason and only last week with my colleagues I met with NGOs and politicians concerned about the impact of cluster munitions to discuss both Oslo and CCW.

Controlling and reducing the proliferation of conventional arms is important, but I have come here to focus on nuclear disarmament.

As the preamble to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty makes clear, all States party to the Treaty should work towards "the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States in order to facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons, the elimination of all their existing stockpiles, and the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery..."

This is not some "get out" clause for the five recognised Nuclear Weapon States. Rather it is recognition that all signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty already have agreed to strive for measures which provide an environment for all Nuclear Weapon States to eliminate their holdings. This is a joint commitment and it is a joint responsibility.

As this Conference knows too well, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty has not yet entered into force and there is an ongoing stalemate on a Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty. This hardly gives the impression that progress is being made.

Solutions

It may be a truism but global challenges require global solutions. The solutions must take us all towards an increase in the pace of multilateral disarmament as well as a reduction in proliferation.

The international community needs a transparent, sustainable and credible plan for multilateral nuclear disarmament. A plan that also addresses proliferation, so that disarmament and counter-proliferation both move forward together, each supporting the other. Although, we all understand that there is no formal conditionality between progress on disarmament and non-proliferation, our goal should be a virtuous circle, where progress on one reinforces the other.

Our chances of eliminating nuclear weapons will be enhanced immeasurably if the Non-Nuclear Weapon States can see forward planning, commitment and action toward multilateral nuclear disarmament by Nuclear Weapon States. Without this, we risk generating the perception that the Nuclear Weapon States are failing to fulfil their disarmament obligations and this will be used by some states as an excuse for their nuclear intransigence.

What then should this plan comprise of?

Let me start with the question of reductions to the major nuclear arsenals.

There is little public acknowledgement of the vast cuts so far in US and Russian warheads, especially since the Cold War. Nor, for that matter, the cuts to the much smaller French and UK stocks.

I welcome the recent news by the US that, by 2012, their stockpile will be at its lowest for 50 years – less than one quarter of the level at the end of the Cold War. We all need to maintain this effort but we also need to get better at publicising the fact that we are on this path.

We must also welcome the ongoing bilateral discussions between the US and Russia for a follow-on arrangement after the current START treaty expires. Success would provide a powerful signal that the post Cold War disarmament trend towards zero will continue.

States also need to explore whether there is scope to reduce further the number of nuclear weapons they need to maintain an effective deterrent. The UK set an example by reducing our operationally available warheads by a further 20% when we decided last year to maintain our own minimum nuclear deterrent beyond the life of the current Vanguard-class submarines ,

The international climate must become one that gives all Nuclear Weapon States the confidence to continue to make similar changes.

I welcome the discussions on how to deal with States who may leave the NPT. Leaving any treaty is always a sovereign decision, but the NPT Review Conference in 2010 should send a message to any States considering withdrawal that such a decision will have consequences.

We must be resolute in tackling proliferation challenges. We must confront states who are looking to breach their obligations and undermine global security by developing WMD. And within the international community we must ensure there is no space for such proliferators.

The UK is committed to supporting the universal right of access to safe, secure and peaceful nuclear technology. But this cannot be at the risk of further proliferation. It is in this context that we have developed the concept of an Enrichment Bond – whereby assistance is granted in return for demonstrable commitment to non-proliferation.

We should also continue to strive for the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and progress in its verification system. I warmly welcome the ratification last week by Columbia – real evidence of progress on this key piece of our security architecture. Since 1991, the UK has not tested a nuclear weapon and I call on all states to ratify the CTBT as soon as possible, especially those so-called Annex II states whose ratification is required for the Treaty's entry into force

I believe a key milestone towards building this climate for disarmament is securing a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, which, in real ways, will limit the ability of signatory states to expand their nuclear arsenals and which will provide the necessary reassurance to their neighbours and the international community.

Since 1995, the UK has had a moratorium on production of fissile material for nuclear weapons purposes and permanently placed excess defence material under international safeguards. The US, France and Russia have announced similar formal arrangements. But we want to see that political commitment transformed into a legal one through a treaty.

In 2007, the International Community came very close to starting negotiations in 2007 and I commend all those states who were willing to take part. And I call on those three states that did not, to do so this year. As UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, said last month, we all have legitimate national security concerns, but without any preconditions, let's at least get to negotiations of a Treaty, where these security concerns can then be addressed.

Some commentators have raised the idea of taking the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty out of the Conference and negotiating a treaty amongst a smaller group of like-minded nations. Frankly this misses the very point of the Conference – it is the only body where all nuclear armed States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States sit together to discuss security issues of the highest sensitivity.

Safeguarding fissile material is a crucial responsibility of those who possess nuclear weapons. So let us work together within this Conference to make real multilateral progress.

But just as the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty is a high priority for the UK, I acknowledge other nations have other priorities, such as negotiating a new legal instrument on preventing an arms race in space.

At the UN, the UK consistently has supported the annual resolution on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space. But there is no international consensus on the need to start negotiations on a new international legal instrument governing the military use of space. So rather than allowing this stalemate to continue, efforts should instead be focused on areas such as transparency and confidence building to allow us all to move forward.

UK / Defence Contribution

So what is the UK, and more specifically the Ministry of Defence, doing to help move this agenda along, and to help create an environment conducive to multilateral nuclear disarmament?

Already we have contributed in the most tangible way through reducing the number of operationally available warheads to fewer than 160. This has now been achieved. And if we are able to reduce further, we will do that.

With a contribution from the UK government, the International Institute for Strategic Studies is examining the political and technical requirements for a world free from nuclear weapons. And I look forward to the final report, which will be published later this year.

However, one area on which I would like to focus is our work on verification of nuclear disarmament.

Just as the then UK Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said last year, I too want the UK to be seen as a 'disarmament laboratory'. By that I mean the UK becoming a role model and testing ground for measures that we and others can take on key aspects of disarmament. In particular, measures needed to determine the requirements for the verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons.

Any verification regime will have to be robust, effective and mutually trusted and, crucially, one that doesn't give away national security or proliferation-sensitive information.

The more reductions states make, the more confidence they will require that no one is cheating and secretly retaining a "marginal nuclear weapon". It is therefore of paramount importance that verification techniques are developed which enable us all – Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States – to have confidence that when a state says it has fully and irrevocably dismantled a nuclear warhead, we all can be assured it is telling the truth.

The UK is ready to lead the way on this. Research into how one technically verifies the dismantlement of a warhead continues at the UK's Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston.

Developing such techniques will take time but it is very important it is not undertaken in 'splendid isolation'. It must be built on the requirements of Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Weapon States alike. We need to consider not only what information we are willing to divulge but also what information a Non-Nuclear Weapon State will want to receive.

With this in mind, over the last year AWE has developed a technical cooperation initiative with several Norwegian defence laboratories. The process of engaging with Norway must avoid breaching our mutual NPT obligations, which in itself serves as useful insight into how future multilateral discussions might proceed.

The difficulty is in developing technologies which strike the right balance between protecting security and proliferation considerations and, at the same time, providing sufficient international access and verification. But this is a challenge we can overcome.

If we are serious about doing our bit to create the conditions for complete nuclear disarmament, we must now also begin to build deeper technical relationships on disarmament between nuclear weapon states.

So I come to this Conference with a proposal.

As a next step, and following on from the AWE research, the UK is willing to host a technical conference of P5 nuclear laboratories on the verification of nuclear disarmament before the next NPT Review Conference in 2010. We hope such a conference will enable the five recognised nuclear weapons states to reinforce a process of mutual confidence building: working together to solve some of these difficult technical issues.

As part of our global efforts, we also hope to engage with other P5 states in other

confidence-building measures on nuclear disarmament throughout this NPT Review Cycle. The aim here is to promote greater trust and confidence as a catalyst for further reductions in warheads - but without undermining the credibility of our existing nuclear deterrents.

So to summarise, we face serious threats. But we face them together – that is the nature of today's globalised interdependent world. We need a transparent, sustainable and credible plan for multilateral nuclear disarmament. A plan shared by Nuclear Weapon States and Non-Nuclear Weapon States alike.

I have suggested some of the elements of that plan. But the UK certainly does not have a monopoly on good ideas – others have put equally good proposals on the table, and I encourage states to suggest further initiatives.

So let us all work together with resolve and ambition to lay the foundations that will allow us to move towards that shared vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.