The Netherlands at the Conference on Disarmament

On the following pages is the text of the statement the foreign minister of the Netherlands, Bert Koenders, made on 2 March 2015 to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The statement came shortly after the publication in the media of a wonderful photograph by Martin Le-May of a weasel riding a flying woodpecker. The image seemed too fantastic to be true, but evidently it was real. We were struck by the parallel with Koenders’ statement: it too portrays a weasel in a fantastic pose, too ridiculous to credit, but apparently in earnest. Let’s have a closer look at this remarkable flight of fantasy.

Koenders signals early that he intends to depart from reality, describing the 2010 NPT review conference as “an unqualified success”. Soon he is talking about the Conference on Disarmament being “an essential part” of a “well-functioning disarmament mechanism”, before describing the stalemate in the Conference as “unacceptable” (the Netherlands, like other members of the Conference, has been accepting it for 18 years, and apparently plans to go right on accepting it).

But then he climbs onto his woodpecker and really takes flight. “All states, inside and outside the NPT, can take steps”, he says, such as “reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military and security doctrines” and “increasing transparency of ... nuclear forces”. These steps would be “concrete, practical and feasible measures that would build the trust needed to eliminate these weapons completely”.

Koenders doesn’t go on to mention the steps that the Netherlands has taken to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its own security doctrine, or to increase the transparency of the nuclear forces based in the Netherlands. This is because the Netherlands hasn’t taken any. Neither does it seem to have any plans to take any. Why not? Koenders says “more can and should be done” on nuclear disarmament, that “complications cannot justify inaction or giving up”, and that “security and stability considerations ... must not become an excuse for inaction”. Except for his own country, apparently.

We are pretty cynical and hard-bitten here at Wildfire>, and certainly no strangers to abject hypocrisy, but we confess to being astounded by the utter lack of insight and self-awareness displayed here. Did Koenders - or anyone in the Dutch foreign ministry - actually read and think about the statement? Or was it just pasted together on autopilot, from a selection of the usual cliches?

To add insult to injury, Koenders concludes by mentioning that the Netherlands is standing for election to a non-permanent seat on the Security Council in 2016. Why would any country vote for a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do hypocrite state oblivious to its own role in perpetuating the problems it claims to be working to solve? That's what we have the permanent members for.

Since Koenders’ extraordinary statement, we have used the phrase “riding the woodpecker” to refer to the practice of weasel states of resolutely but implausibly ignoring their own contributions to preserving the status quo and avoiding progress on nuclear disarmament.
Mr President, Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Conference on Disarmament today.

Disarmament has always been one of the United Nations' raisons d'être. Achieving global nuclear disarmament was the subject of the first resolution by the General Assembly in 1946. Memories of the horrific events of the Second World War were still fresh in people's minds. The world had seen the images of nuclear devastation in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which we will commemorate again this year. No one wanted those horrors ever to be repeated.

So we started building global institutions to avoid new conflicts. And we made new arrangements for international cooperation, justice and disarmament. But in spite of the ideals that inspired us and the international institutions we established, we ended up in a Cold War, in an arms race with enormous stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and with horrifying concepts like 'mutual assured destruction'.

Fortunately, the changes in the international climate following the end of the Cold War made progress on disarmament possible. Since that time we have concluded the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995 was a major achievement. And the 2010 NPT Review Conference was an unqualified success – all parties agreed an ambitious Action Plan for the years ahead.

Since 1989, nuclear weapons arsenals have been slashed. Most recently, the New START Treaty in 2011 led to a substantial reduction in both US and Russian warheads. Compared to the situation in the 1980s, stockpiles have been cut by 80%.

These are all important achievements. This Conference, and many of you personally, can claim some of the credit for this success.
However, measured by the benchmark of the first General Assembly resolution in 1946, we are still performing miserably. This is a cause of grave concern for my country. The Netherlands is fully committed to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. And while we should recognise that much has been achieved, more can and should be done.

To be fair, the current geopolitical situation is not conducive to disarmament. We should not be naïve and pretend that the work of disarmament occurs in a political vacuum. There are complications. But there are always complications.

It reminds me of the story of the traveller who got lost in a busy and chaotic city. With map in hand, he asked a local for directions. ‘If I were you,’ the local man answered, ‘I wouldn’t start from here.’

However, we cannot choose our starting point, and complications cannot justify inaction or giving up. The current difficulties in the international arena are no reason to abandon nuclear disarmament. Even during the Cold War, we kept talking and managed to conclude some key disarmament treaties. Especially in troubling times, we need to keep channels of communication open, press onwards with disarmament negotiations, and step up our efforts to find common ground and make progress.

To achieve this, we need a well-functioning disarmament mechanism. The Conference on Disarmament is an essential part of that. First and foremost, this Conference could and should have started the year by adopting a Programme of Work.

The current stalemate is of great concern to us. To be frank, it’s unacceptable. My country will continue to press to revitalise the Conference, focusing on areas where progress is possible: the Programme of Work on the four core issues, as well as enlargement, working methods and civil society participation. The Netherlands will do its utmost, particularly during our upcoming presidency in July and August.

One of our key priorities in the Programme of Work is an immediate start to negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for explosive devices, an FMCT. We are part of the Group of Governmental Experts on FMCT. We think the group is doing important groundwork, and I would like to commend Ambassador Elissa Golberg for her excellent work as Chair. We hope the group’s efforts will soon lead to the commencement of negotiations on an FMCT.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Allow me to turn now to the NPT Review Conference, which will start in less than two months in New York. It will be the most important conference of its kind this year. The NPT is the cornerstone of our disarmament and non-proliferation policy, and a successful outcome of the Review Conference is in all our interests.

Over the last several years, the Netherlands has tried to do its share in implementing the 2010 Action Plan. Let me give you a few examples. We have contributed to the IAEA’s technical cooperation programme and its Peaceful Uses Initiative. We helped strengthen the safeguards system by supporting the IAEA and promoting the Additional Protocol. We worked to enhance nuclear security by organising the Nuclear Security Summit last year in The Hague. And together with our partners in the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, we presented a draft reporting form to the nuclear weapon states that they can use to provide more transparency about their arsenals and doctrines.

Let me add here that while we of course welcome these states’ reporting, there is still room for improvement. In fact, we would like to make reporting mandatory in the future NPT review process.

We are strongly committed to working constructively towards a positive outcome for this year’s conference. In the NPDI outreach paper, which I highly recommend, we set out our main objectives for the final document of the 2015 Review Conference.

In brief, a successful conference requires taking stock, honestly and fairly, of the progress made. And using that evaluation as a basis for tangible follow-up steps, particularly on those actions that have still been only partly implemented. A successful conference also means addressing all three of the NPT’s pillars: disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use.

During the conference, the Netherlands will hold a scholarly symposium in close cooperation with UNODA and several academic partners. It will take place on 28 April at UN headquarters. Its main purpose is to give an overview of worldwide research related to the NPT, and to learn about current and future challenges and opportunities. Academic experts can contribute to the review process by coming up with new ideas and concepts. You are all invited to attend.

We need to acknowledge the frustration in the NPT community at the slow pace of disarmament.

There is a widening gap between many parties’ ambitions and aspirations and the prospects for progress. The growing attention at the conferences in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna to the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons reflects those ambitions and aspirations. The Netherlands participated in all three conferences. For us, the humanitarian consequences underlie everything we do in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation. At the same time,
we have to take full account of security and stability considerations. Although some downplay them, these factors cannot be ignored. But they must not become an excuse for inaction.

There are different views on how best to achieve nuclear disarmament. Some believe that immediately starting negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or a nuclear weapons ban is the best way forward. While we understand the desire to make progress, we believe that a step-by-step approach is the most effective, as it pairs ambition with realism. All states, inside and outside the NPT, can take steps like promoting the entry into force of the Comprehensive nuclear Test Ban Treaty, starting the negotiation of a fissile materials cut-off treaty, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military and security doctrines, increasing transparency of and de-alerting nuclear forces, and reducing and ultimately eliminating nuclear arsenals in a transparent verifiable and irreversible manner. These would be concrete, practical and feasible measures that would build the trust needed to eliminate these weapons completely.

While we have different ideas about the best way forward, our shared goal – a world free of nuclear weapons – gives me hope. The Netherlands’ guiding principle is that whatever we do is aimed at strengthening the NPT regime. And at supporting the full implementation of the NPT, which provides the legal framework for disarmament as well as non-proliferation. We will spare no effort to achieve these ends.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is only right that we pay so much attention to nuclear disarmament. But we should not forget the progress that has been made on conventional disarmament, in the broadest sense. I am delighted that the Arms Trade Treaty entered into force last Christmas. We should now focus on implementing this landmark treaty, which sets the standard for the regulation of the conventional arms trade. We are looking forward to the first meeting of the States Parties in Mexico. We hope we will be able to deal swiftly with the technical parts of the treaty, so we can soon turn our attention to its actual implementation.

Another recent success is the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and we look forward to the first Review Conference in Dubrovnik in September. In the space of five years a clear norm has been established on the non-use of cluster munitions. Many countries have destroyed their stockpiles. And most countries’ clearance of cluster munitions is either well underway or complete. But more needs to be done.

In the run-up to Dubrovnik we need to think in particular about how to further strengthen the norm of non-use of cluster munitions.

Unfortunately, several instances of the use of cluster munitions have been reported in the last few years. Most recently, on 3 February the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission reported the
apparent use of cluster munitions in Luhansk, Ukraine. We are deeply concerned about this report. We call on everyone, including all governments, to refrain from using cluster munitions and to take all necessary measures to protect civilians from them.

With 162 States Parties, the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention is an unqualified success. At last year’s successful review conference in Maputo, the States Parties agreed to clear all anti-personnel mines before 2025, thereby effectively ending the threat from these horrible weapons. They also agreed an action plan for moving forward on the outstanding issues. As the fifth-largest donor of mine-related assistance, the Netherlands is prepared to do its share. We are already funding programmes in Afghanistan, Cambodia, the DRC, Iraq, Laos, Lebanon, Libya, Mozambique, the Palestinian Territories, Somalia and South Sudan, and we will continue to do so.

Looking at new issues, the Netherlands supports the ongoing discussions on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems. The legal, ethical and policy questions surrounding these weapons need to be tackled head on. A critical aspect of this discussion is the notion of ‘meaningful human control’. My country recently started a research programme to help clarify this issue, which warrants further international debate.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our accomplishments should help us look beyond our failures and beyond the complications that hinder progress. We cannot take refuge in the notion that our current situation is not the ideal point of departure for reaching our goal. We need to take action.

From this room, from the NPT Review Conference and from the First Committee. And last but not least: from the UN Security Council. Disarmament is crucial to promote international peace and security. The Kingdom of the Netherlands wants to be your partner for peace, justice and development. For this reason we are candidate for a non-permanent seat in the Council for the 2017-2018 term.

To remind us of what is possible in spite of the difficulties, I am pleased to present you with the first copies of a publication that assembles in one work all the international agreements to date on disarmament and non-proliferation. This is yet another product of the close partnership between UNODA and the Netherlands. We hope it will be a helpful tool for experts, diplomats and researchers as well as non-parties. We also hope it will inspire you to make sure that a new edition is needed in the near future, because another landmark treaty has to be added.
After all, disarmament is – and should be – a work in progress. And you are the actors who make sure that we keep making progress. I wish you much inspiration and wisdom in carrying out the important task that rests upon your shoulders.

Thank you.