

STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR J. ALAN BEESLEY, O.C.,Q.C.

Before the  
Conference on Disarmament  
Friday, August 30, 1985

Mr. President,

On the closing day of the Session and as I am speaking for the first time under your presidency, I would like to join those who have already congratulated you in having contributed so much to the success of the 1985 Session by your skillful and firm leadership, during this difficult month which included the adoption of the report of the Conference on Disarmament to the United Nations General Assembly.

I also take this occasion to bid farewell to three friends and colleagues who are leaving us this year: Ambassador Alessi of Italy; Ambassador Dubey of India and my neighbour to my right, Ambassador Maung Maung Gyi of Burma. I would like to offer them my best wishes in their future functions.

Mr. President,

In my statement today, I will address briefly the question of possible improvements in the procedures and process of the Conference on Disarmament which might enable us all to concentrate more time and energy to substantive issues and less on procedure . In so doing, I am not speaking as western coordinator.

On April 4 this year I noted the extent to which the Conference on Disarmament becomes mired in procedural discussions. Since then other delegations have made similar comments, most recently the delegations of Brazil and Venezuela. No one suggests that even a wholly perfect process would necessarily achieve a breakthrough in the negotiations going on in the Conference on Disarmament, but it seems increasingly clear that the procedural gridlock which arises repeatedly in the Conference reflects to some degree its own agreed procedures.

An article which will be published shortly in the UN periodical "Disarmament" reads in part as follows:

"Some of the procedural problems of the Conference on Disarmament are:

- (a) the rigid application to procedure as well as substance of its rule of decision by consensus, applied in practice as a rule of unanimity, permitting the veto by any delegation of procedural decisions such as mandates of subsidiary bodies and other similar issues;
- (b) the Presidency of the Conference changes each month, thereby greatly adding to the difficulties inherent in the role of the President in attempting to direct debate, coordinate consultations and structure negotiations;
- (c) the subsidiary organs of the Conference, with only very few and occasional exceptions, must be established anew at the opening of each spring session, resulting in sometimes lengthy negotiations not always leading to the reestablishment of a pre-existing subsidiary organ.
- (d) the Chairmanships of subsidiary organs (both ad hoc committees and working groups) if and when they are established, change each year in almost every case, thus greatly adding to the problems of the Chairmen in charge of negotiations on complex technical and controversial issues;
- (e) on procedural questions (and sometimes on substance) the Conference on Disarmament emulates other UN organs through its institutionalization of "group dynamics", pursuant to which the "Western" and "Socialist" and "Group of 21" (as well as China) all speak through single spokesmen or coordinators, who themselves change at least once each year, thus ensuring the least common denominator approach to many questions;"

I would now add to these points, another, namely:

- (f) the report writing exercise appears to have become gradually more cumbersome and time consuming every year, to the point where the Conference spends a disproportionate amount of time to produce a report which may well confuse its intended readers rather than present a clear and factual record of the work done during the Session.

The article already mentioned went on to say:  
"The question arises whether any radical changes in the procedures of the Conference on Disarmament can be made in the light of its history, owing its origin, as it does, to the first Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Disarmament".

Mr. President, I offer these comments in a constructive spirit not directed at any particular delegation or group. May I suggest that we all reflect on these questions during the intersessional period, particularly their cumulative effect on our work, which can give the wholly false impression that we are sometimes more concerned with process than progress.

Let us depart with optimism, based on a determination to do better when next we meet.