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**BELGIUM**

**Statement by Mrs. Hadja Lahbib, Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Federal Cultural Institutions**

**Conference on Disarmament**

**Geneva, 27 February 2023**

Mr. President,

Belgium fully aligns itself with the statement on behalf of the European Union which will be delivered later. I will limit myself to some national observations.

Allow me first to wish you every success in your duties as President of the Conference on Disarmament. Please be assured of the full support of my delegation in carrying out your responsibilities.

Mr. President,

The multilateral order is in crisis. Russia has shaken its foundation by its brutal invasion of Ukraine and its total disregard for international law, including international humanitarian law. There can be no neutrality when every tenet of international law is being violated. States should speak out and defend law against chaos.

The conference on Disarmament is part of our international rules-based order, as the sole multilateral disarmament negotiation forum. It can fall prey to institutional gridlock, or it can seek an effective way forward and start to deliver on its promise. Small steps can counter defeatism. In any case, it is not by stifling debate and excluding the participation of observers that mutual understanding or the effectiveness of our work will be increased. We cannot accept Russia’s politically motivated approach to block the participation of certain States, international organisations and non-governmental organisations in international fora.

Mr. President,

Recent scantily clad nuclear threats have strengthened our understanding that allowing the nuclear sword of Damocles to forever hang above our heads is no recipe for stability and peace. While our goal of a nuclear weapons-free world may remain distant, as an absolute minimum, further expansion of existing nuclear arsenals should be anathema. This requires China, the only nuclear weapon State still increasing its warhead stockpile, to shift its course. This policy reversal should be cemented by a clear moratorium on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons use. The two nuclear superpowers, for their part, should retain the acquis of New START and expand its benefits through a follow-on agreement. This requires Russia to return to full compliance with the Treaty and to allow inspections its territory. Russia’s decision to “suspend” its participation in New START is deeply worrying. We urge Russia to rescind its decision.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty remains our beacon, but its implementation cannot be completed without its universalization. The States still outside the regime should understand that accession to the NPT serves their self-interest and constitutes a prerequisite for global peace and security.

A world without nuclear weapons will not emerge in a world where nuclear tests are carried out. We need a legally binding and universal standard, as well as an internationally recognized and effective verification mechanism. Only the CTBT offers this. We urge all States to accede to this essential Treaty. We welcome the recent spate of accessions to the Treaty, which continues this year. We commend Executive Secretary Floyd for his universalization efforts. With the CTBT-membership continuing to increase, arguments for staying outside this norm ring more and more hollow. It is especially incumbent upon those States with new or existing nuclear programmes to accept a legally binding end to nuclear testing. No State should wait for the action of another State to do the right thing.

Mr. President,

While we struggle curbing arms proliferation on earth, the expanding exploration of space presents us with new challenges. As on earth, civilian applications can be used for military applications. Russia’s destructive test of a direct-ascent anti-satellite missile in 2021 illustrates the pressing need to move forward on setting norms on responsible behavior in outer space. A commitment to not conduct such tests is an essential step in this regard. Transparency and confidence-building measures can reduce misunderstandings with regard to the activities and intentions of States in outer space. They are an important stepping-stone towards reaching a more comprehensive agreement on the sensitive issue of preventing an arms race in outer space.

Mr. President,

Despite your efforts, and those of your predecessor, the Conference was unable to adopt a decision on a work programme this year. Strong political will and pragmatic commitment will be needed from all CD members to overcome the continuing stalemate affecting the Conference.

It is essential to revitalize the substantive work within this forum with a view to concrete negotiations, after decades of the status quo. Above all, the Conference must initiate negotiations on a treaty prohibiting the production of fissile material. Such a treaty would help to make the reduction of nuclear arsenals irreversible.

Mr. President,

The Conference on Disarmament does not operate in a vacuum, nor should it ignore reality. The pertinence of gender issues for international peace and security has been fully recognized by the international community since the adoption of Security Council resolution 1325 well over 20 years ago. Still, this august body has failed to update its Rules of Procedure to be gender neutral. We urge the presidency to devote sufficient time and effort to resolve this issue this year.

Finally Mr. President,

The people of Ukraine deserve peace. Russia must stop its unlawful invasion of Ukraine now and withdraw all its troops from the whole territory of Ukraine.

Thank you.