

## Remarks to Astana Conference, Monday, 29 August 2016

### Trevor Findlay

Thank you Chair and thanks to you and PNND and the government of Kazakhstan for convening this incredible event.

I have been asked, as a member of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters (ABDM), to make some remarks about the role of the United Nations in advancing the cause of disarmament. That role has always been vital, not just in providing a forum for member states to present their views and seek agreement. It has also been a valuable player in its own right. The UN organization, represented by the Secretary-General, can be a true advocate for disarmament when others are merely paying lip service to it and when interest fades. The head of the UN can employ moral, ethical, political, legal, humanitarian and justice-based arguments in a way that national politicians cannot. The current Secretary-General has continued this tradition with his Five Point Proposal for Nuclear Disarmament which he presented in 2008. Such interventions can give political backing and much needed encouragement to supportive member states and civil society to continue their advocacy.

The Secretary-General is supported in his disarmament role by several important institutions. First is the Office of Disarmament Affairs. UNODA compiles and disseminates information on disarmament matters, engages with member states and other stakeholders; supports talks and negotiations; and maintains databases that compile information provided by member states in accordance with UN resolutions and treaties.

The Secretary-General also has an Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, of which I am proud to be a current member. I recognize in the audience former Board member from Kazakhstan, Togzhan Kassenova, and current member Anita Friedt of the United States. The ABDM was established in 1978 by the First Special Session of the UN General Assembly devoted to disarmament. It meets twice a year and has 15 members from all regions of the world, acting in their personal capacities. Although little known, it plays an important role behind the scenes

in providing expert analysis of key issues identified by the Secretary-General and in generating potential initiatives that he may take. It can be especially useful in floating creative new ideas—hopefully not too crazy—that may not yet be ripe for negotiation and which are unlikely to be proposed by member states, but which deserve study and research. Recent examples relate to cyber warfare, autonomous weapon systems and a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction.

The Board also acts as trustees of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). The institute, based in Geneva, also dates to the First Special Session on Disarmament. It is a remarkable organization that, with limited resources and a small staff, has managed to produce independent, professional research on a staggering range of disarmament issues—from nuclear disarmament to small arms and light weapons. Many member states have benefited from its research, assistance and advice.

Recently, however, UNIDIR has been under a cloud. This is due largely to declining financial support from the UN regular budget and from member states (with a few significant exceptions). The institute from the outset was intended to be funded largely by voluntary contributions, with regular funding from the UN budget only to support its basic infrastructure and staff.

I am pleased to report that due to a sterling effort by the Friends of UNIDIR, a group of supportive states, and the trustees, a resolution was adopted at last year's UN General Assembly that promises a new beginning for the institute. The institute is currently in the process of recruiting a new Director and new funding has been secured.

UNIDIR is not out of the woods yet, however. It needs sustained, guaranteed political and financial support from the UN, its member states, philanthropic funders and non-governmental organizations. I would urge you all to visit the UNIDIR website ([www.unidir.org](http://www.unidir.org)) for a glimpse into its outstanding work on behalf of the global disarmament community. I'm not sure it has crowd-sourced funding opportunities yet, but I urge you all to encourage your governments and organizations to consider contributing financially to UNIDIR to help it survive and grow.

Moving onto another matter, in light of the many statements at this conference about the effects of nuclear testing on indigenous peoples I wish to acknowledge the suffering of the Australian aborigines as a result of British nuclear testing in Australia. Two major test series were conducted at Maralinga in South Australia between 1956 and 1963. The site was also used for hundreds of minor trials. Like Semipalatinsk, the South Australian desert was considered to be remote, empty and uninhabited. But of course Australian aborigines had lived there for millennia. The starkest incident came the morning after a major nuclear test, when an aboriginal family was found camping on the edge of the crater formed by the blast. So much for the land being *terra nullius*. While the period of testing was relatively brief, the cleanup of the site has taken decades and will never be complete. Even though the lands were returned to the indigenous Maralinga Tjarutja people and compensation paid by the Australian government there are still fenced-off radioactive zones that will be off-limits for thousands of years. This legacy, like that of other nuclear tests, reinforces the need for a legally-binding, universal ban on nuclear tests in all environments for all time through entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.