

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

CD/PV.1091
15 February 2008

ENGLISH

FINAL RECORD OF THE ONE THOUSAND AND NINETY-FIRST PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 15 February 2008, at 10.15 a.m.

President: Mr. Mohamed BEL KEFI (Tunisia)

The PRESIDENT (spoke in French): I declare open the 1091st plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament.

I thank you for responding promptly to my request to organize this plenary meeting today. I have convened this meeting at the express request of the Ambassador of the United States, Ms. Rocca, who wishes to make a statement on items on the agenda of the Conference.

Madam Ambassador, you have the floor.

Ms. ROCCA (United States of America): In the interests of transparency, I have requested to take the floor this morning to address a matter of interest to the Conference, consistent with the provisions of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and in the spirit of international cooperation.

The United States of America wishes to inform the Conference that the President of the United States has authorized the United States Department of Defense to attempt the engagement of an inoperable National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) satellite, which is currently in a decaying orbit. The President determined that protecting against the possible risk to human life was paramount. The highly toxic nature of the satellite's fully fuelled hydrazine tank, which would likely survive in a natural re-entry, was the key factor influencing this decision.

We have recently modified three SM-3 missiles and three United States Navy ships to perform this mission. If this engagement is successful, we anticipate rupturing the fuel tank, and causing the hydrazine to dissipate, so that it will no longer pose a danger to human life. We will choose the time, location, and geometry of the engagement to maximize the chance of hitting the fuel tank and to ensure that the resulting debris will re-enter quickly and thus not pose a danger to satellites and peaceful space operations. Additionally, the engagement point will be carefully chosen to minimize the chance that any initial debris re-entering after the engagement will impact a populated area.

If the engagement fails, the NRO satellite is expected to make an uncontrolled re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere on or about 6 March 2008. At present, we cannot predict the entry impact area, which could occur in any region on the Earth's surface between 58.5 degrees North and 58.5 degrees South latitudes. If the engagement attempt fails, we are examining options for consequence management to mitigate the hazards that could be created if a fully fuelled hydrazine tank were to land in an inhabited area.

Whether the engagement succeeds or fails, the United States is prepared to offer assistance to governments to mitigate the consequences of any satellite debris impacts on their territory. The United States does not require assistance from other governments for tracking or for re-entry prediction.

The 1972 Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects provides that a party will be "absolutely liable" for damages "caused by its space object on the surface of the Earth or to aircraft in flight". The United States is a party to that convention, so any liability to other treaty parties would be determined in accordance with its terms. Should

(Ms. Rocca, United States)

there be recoverable debris or component parts that land on the territory of a foreign government, the United States may wish to recover them in accordance with article 5 of the 1968 Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space.

All actions regarding this matter will be consistent with the provisions of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty.

Our transparency in notifying foreign governments and the broader international community is consistent with our commitment to safe and responsible space operations. This extraordinary engagement is an emergency response to prevent the possible loss of life. This engagement is not part of an anti-satellite development and testing programme, and we do not intend to retain the technical capability resulting from the modifications required to carry out the engagement.

The United States is prepared to further discuss this subject in the Conference on Disarmament in the interests of transparency.

The PRESIDENT (spoke in French): Thank you for that important statement, Madam Ambassador.

Does any delegation wish to take the floor at this stage?

It seems not. That concludes our proceedings for today. The next plenary meeting of the Conference will be held with Turkey in the Chair on Tuesday, 19 February 2008 at 10 a.m. in this room.

The meeting rose at 10.15 a.m.