



STATEMENT

by

H.E Dell Higgie

Ambassador for Disarmament &
Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament
On behalf of the De-alerting Group:

Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland

at the

UNGA73: First Committee
Nuclear Weapons Cluster

United Nations, New York

Thursday 18 October, 2018

Mr Chairman,

I have the honour of taking the floor on behalf of the De-alerting Group – Chile, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sweden, Switzerland and my own country New Zealand – on the issue of decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems (or de-alerting).

This issue is not new – it has been under discussion in a number of international fora, including the NPT, for many years. It has been a formal part of the UNGA's agenda since 2007 when the De-alerting Group was founded. Since that time, our group, and our resolution in the UNGA, has continued to call for the de-alerting of nuclear weapon systems – both as a risk reduction measure and as a concrete step toward nuclear disarmament. We agree with the Secretary-General's acknowledgement, in his Agenda for Disarmament, of the urgency of risk reduction and of nuclear disarmament – and we agree, too, that de-alerting should be an issue on which there is strong international consensus.

UN High Representative for Disarmament Izumi Nakamitsu highlighted in her opening remarks last week that nuclear weapons pose grave risks. These will remain as long as nuclear weapons exist. It is well known that these risks multiply significantly when nuclear weapons are on high alert – risks such as inadvertent launches due to technical failure or operator error; the possibility of misinterpretation of early warning data; failures of, and false reports by, early warning systems; and use of nuclear weapons by unauthorised actors such as rogue military units, terrorists or cyber-attackers. It is also widely acknowledged, including by former military leaders from those States with the largest nuclear arsenals, that de-alerting is of most value during times of heightened tensions – times, as we have been reminded again in this Committee by those same States, such as now. Against this backdrop, the case for urgent action on de-alerting should be compelling.

This is not just a theoretical concern but one substantiated by the significant history of accidents and close calls, particularly on the part of those in possession of the largest nuclear arsenals. Over the past decades, both the US and Russia have received erroneous information from early warning sensors or have misinterpreted warning data. There have been other similar accidents. In each case we have been extraordinarily fortunate that disaster has been averted. But given the devastating consequences of even the accidental use of nuclear weapons, it is not sufficient to have to continue our reliance on good fortune.

Mr Chair,

We regret that some nuclear weapon States have moved away from their earlier acknowledgement of the risks of having nuclear forces on high alert, and have instead sought to assert that de-alerting could create “dangerous deterrence instabilities” and lead to a “rush to re-alert in a crisis or conflict”.

We would highlight that, apart from being circular, arguments defending and promoting the retention of nuclear weapons on high-alert status reflect a shift away from existing commitments to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines, to recognise the legitimate interest of non-nuclear weapon States in further reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems, and to take concrete agreed measures to de-alert. At this time of heightened international tension, it would indeed be more stabilising to provide reassurance of an intention to fulfil existing obligations and commitments,

It is against this backdrop that the De-alerting Group will once again run its resolution entitled “Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems” (L.52). The resolution features very limited updates to the resolution last adopted in 2016. That resolution - 71/53 - achieved its highest level of support yet. 175

states voted in favour of it, with a significant number of states also co-sponsoring it. The 2016 resolution sent a clear message about the need to renew efforts to ensure that the commitments to take nuclear weapons from high alert are fulfilled.

That message is yet more crucial today. The nuclear weapon states should urgently implement previously agreed commitments on de-alerting and take steps to rapidly reduce operational readiness – unilaterally, bilaterally or multilaterally – with a view to ensuring that all nuclear weapons are removed from high alert status.

We call on all States to support our resolution this year – including by co-sponsoring it – and look forward to working together in all relevant fora to make much needed progress on de-alerting.

Thank you Mr Chair.