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Statement by Kenneth D. Hodgkins, United States Adviser to the 51st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee on Agenda Item 83, International Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, November 12, 1996

Since the U.N. General Assembly last considered international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, a number of important developments occurred in the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and in the U.S. space program. My delegation would like to take this opportunity to comment on them.

Recent years have involved unprecedented political change, and have furthered international cooperation in space exploration to the benefit of all countries, as nations pool their scientific expertise and financial resources. Much of our attention today is focused on the application of space techniques to the understanding and solution of terrestrial problems, and this is entirely proper. But exploration of the solar system remains an enticing goal and an important objective as we seek answers to fundamental questions of the origins of the universe and life itself. In 1975, the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project was the first American-Soviet cooperative space flight. When U.S. astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts rendezvoused in space for two days, Apollo-Soyuz showed that opposing superpowers could be united in space exploration.

Over two decades later, the U.S. space program reached a milestone in human space flight in cooperation with Russia. On September 26, 1996, NASA Astronaut Shannon Lucid returned to Earth after traveling more than 75 million miles during her 188-day flight on the Mir. Dr. Lucid joined the Mir in March 1996 with the docking of Mir and the STS-76 Space Shuttle Mission. While aboard the Mir, Dr. Lucid set a U.S. single mission space flight endurance record. Her stay in space eclipsed the previous record of 115 days set by former astronaut Norm Thagard during his flight on the Mir in 1995. Project Apollo was an important early step in our ongoing process of seeking new knowledge, and we continue that search through the highly successful Shuttle-Mir program.

Planetary exploration took on renewed importance when NASA announced in August that a research team had found evidence that strongly suggests a primitive form of microscopic life may have existed on Mars more than 3.6 billion years ago. The research is based on a two-year investigation of an ancient Martian meteorite that landed on Earth some 13,000 years ago. The evidence is not conclusive and demands further scientific investigation. This finding makes NASA's Mars programs all the more crucial. The Mars Global Surveyor, launched last week, and Mars Pathfinder, scheduled for launch later this year, will explore that planet in more detail than has ever been attempted.

A sterling example of how national space programs can provide global benefits is in the area of satellite navigation.

The United States is strongly committed to the basic tenet of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty; namely, that the exploration and use of outer space should be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all states. That commitment was further underscored with the release on March 29th of President Clinton's policy on the use and management of the Global Positioning System (GPS).

GPS was designed by the U.S. Department of Defense as a dual-use system. The 24 satellite constellation makes it possible for users to determine their position and navigate anywhere in the world. Over the past several years, GPS has rapidly become an integral component of the emerging Global Information Infrastructure, with applications including mapping and surveying; international air traffic management; global change research; car navigation; weather prediction; earthquake monitoring; and recreational activities such as hiking and taking measurements at sporting events. The growing demand from military, civil, commercial and scientific users has generated a commercial GPS equipment and service industry that covers the world.

This policy opens the door for rapid growth in international civil, commercial and scientific use of GPS. It announced the U.S. Government's intention to terminate the current practice of degrading civil GPS signals within the next decade, providing a better signal for all users. The policy also reaffirms the U.S. commitment to providing the GPS Standard Positioning Service on a continuous, worldwide basis, free of direct user fees.

As we leave behind the East-West rivalries and enter the Third Millennium, the exploration of outer space will be a major source of technological advances. Recognizing this, President Clinton announced on September 19th a new national space policy that is the first post-Cold War assessment of American space goals and activities. The policy reaffirms our commitment to the exploration and use of outer space by all nations for peaceful purposes and for the benefit of all humanity. It calls on the U.S. space program to enhance knowledge of the Earth, the solar system and the universe through human and robotic exploration and to promote international cooperation in space.

The policy addresses two issues of particular interest to the Committee. Under this policy, space nuclear reactors will not be used in Earth orbit without specific approval by the President or his designee. Such requests for approval will take into account public safety, economic considerations international treaty obligations, and U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. We believe that all countries planning to use space nuclear reactors should adopt an approval process which incorporates these elements. Of equal importance is what the policy says about space debris. It is in the interest of the U.S. Government to ensure that space debris minimization practices are applied by other spacefaring nations and international organizations. The President has directed that the U.S. will take a leadership role in international fora to adopt policies and practices aimed at debris minimization and will cooperate internationally in the exchange of information on debris research and the identification of debris mitigation options.

Mr. Chairman, my delegation would like to join previous speakers in expressing satisfaction with the positive developments that have occurred in the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and its subcommittees. The cooperative spirit in which we have worked over the past year is an encouraging sign that more can be accomplished in the future. We believe that the Committee is making real progress towards focussing its efforts on the serving as an advocate for international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space in the United Nations system. This has not been easy and our most important accomplishments have come only after long and serious negotiations culminated by compromise on the part of all Member States. Although there are still skeptics, the positive results we see today demonstrate that the principle of consensus can work effectively.

In this regard, we are pleased to join consensus on the adoption of the "Declaration on International Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space for the Benefit and in the Interests of All States, Taking into Particular Account the Needs of Developing Countries." After substantial debate, the Committee reached agreement on a balanced text which represents an important statement on the scope and nature of international cooperation in outer space. The Declaration recognizes that States are free to cooperate in the exploration of outer space on a mutually acceptable basis and suggests that particular attention should be given to the benefit for and the interests of developing countries. It also recommends that the Committee should be strengthened in its role as a forum for the exchange of information on space cooperation and encourages States to contribute to the UN Programme on Space Applications. These are laudable goals which reflect, in part, the U.S. practice in conducting international space activities.

I wish to recall that my delegation and others have put forward detailed proposals over the past decade for improving the organization of work in COPUOS and its subcommittees. Indeed, the Committee has concluded that strengthening international cooperation in the peaceful exploration and use of outer space implies the need for the Committee itself to improve, whenever necessary, the methods and forms of its work. We have always taken this mandate seriously. That is why, when one takes stock of what has been achieved to date, we are gratified to see that many of these proposals have in fact been adopted. Of particular note has been the productive discussions in the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee, where space scientists and experts are now playing a central role in the work of that subcommittee.

On the other hand, we are convinced that more can be done on the question of working methods, particularly in the Legal Subcommittee. In this regard, we note that the Chairman of COPUOS, Ambassador Peter Hohenfellner, is conducting consultations on the methods of work and agendas of the Committee and its subcommittees. This is an important step forward in seeking those reforms which will make COPUOS a more effective and efficient body in the UN system. Within the context of these discussions, the U.S. places its highest priority on two results. First, there must be an unambiguous commitment by all member states to the principle of consensus in both substantive and procedural matters taken-up by COPUOS. Second, it is imperative that significant reductions are made in the duration of sessions of the Legal Subcommittee and the Committee. We have demonstrated that these two bodies can complete their work in less time, resulting in real savings in conference services.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, let me reiterate my delegation's full commitment to working with all Member States on making the work of COPUOS as relevant as possible to the ever expanding opportunities for international cooperation in space exploration. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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