

Statement by James Higgins, United States Representative, to the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee on the Re-entry of an Inoperable National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) Satellite
February 15, 2008

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your indulgence in allowing us to speak again on agenda item #4. I believe the Subcommittee is aware from previous press reports that there is a U.S. Government satellite that is expected to reenter the Earth's atmosphere in the next couple of weeks. Yesterday afternoon in Washington, the U.S. announced plans for specific actions regarding that satellite. In the interests of transparency, consistent with the provisions of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, and in the spirit of international cooperation, the United States would like to inform the Subcommittee on this matter.

The President of the United States has authorized the U.S. Department of Defense to attempt the engagement of the 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 fueled hydrazine tank, which would likely survive in a natural re-entry, was the key factor influencing this decision.

The NRO satellite was registered with the Secretary-General of the United Nations as "USA 193" and by the International designator 2006-057A. (Reference: UN Document ST/SG/SER.E/514 of September 17, 2007).

We have recently modified three SM-3 missiles and three U.S. Navy ships to perform this mission. If this engagement is successful, we anticipate rupturing the fuel tank, 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 the initial debris re-entering after the engagement will impact a populated area.

This engagement will not create significant long-lived orbital debris or additional hazards from re-entering debris. We estimate that 99 per cent of the

debris resulting from the engagement will reenter the Earth's atmosphere within two weeks.

The U.S. continues to have the world's strongest domestic regulations for space debris mitigation. The U.S. also continues to support the debris mitigation guidelines developed by the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC) and the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. This engagement attempt falls well within these sets of international guidelines, since orbital debris from this engagement will be extremely short-lived.

As a sign of our transparency, the United States is prepared to brief the Subcommittee on our efforts to minimize debris as a result of this engagement attempt. We can do this during our scheduled technical presentation on the space debris environment next week.

If the engagement fails, the NRO satellite is expected to make an uncontrolled re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere on or about March 6, 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 mitigating the hazards that could be created if a fully fueled hydrazine tank were to land in an inhabited area.

Whether the engagement succeeds or fails, the U.S. is prepared to offer assistance to governments to mitigate the consequences of any satellite debris impacts on their territory. The U.S. 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 U.S. is a party to that convention, so any U.S. liability to other treaty parties would be determined in accordance with its terms.

Should there be recoverable debris or component parts that land on the territory of a foreign government, the U.S. 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.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.