Statement by Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, Permanent Representative of India at the Meeting of the Adhoc Working Group on the Revitalization of the General Assembly on 26 April 2010

Madam Co-Chair,

Let me start by expressing appreciation for the decision taken by you (Ambassador Sanja Štiglic of Slovenia) and our distinguished colleague from Argentina, Ambassador Jorge Argüello (the other Co-Chair) to dedicate one entire meeting to discuss the role and authority of the General Assembly and its relationship to other principal organs of the United Nations.

Today’s discussion is both important and timely. Whilst this issue has been engaging our attention for many years, the time has come for the General Assembly, the G-192 to take remedial action. Not to do so would not only further fuel the prevailing apathy but also strengthen trends to look for solutions elsewhere both within and outside the UN system.

Madam Co-Chair,

India has consistently held the view that the General Assembly can be revitalized only when its position as the chief deliberative, policy-making and representative organ of the United Nations is respected in letter and in spirit. The General Assembly should take the lead in setting the global agenda and restoring the centrality of the United Nations in formulating multilateral approaches to resolving transnational issues. This was the role intended for the Assembly in Article 10 of the UN Charter, namely that it discuss any questions or matters within the scope of the present Charter or relating to the powers and functions of any organs provided for in the Charter, i.e. the Security Council, the ECOSOC, Trusteeship Council, the ICJ as well as the Secretariat.

Madam Co-chair,

A perception that the prerogatives and authority of the General Assembly have been undermined, in particular by the Security Council has gained ground. First, the Council is increasingly encroaching on issues that traditionally fall within the Assembly’s
competence, such as the process of standard-setting and codification of international law and by holding of thematic debates on issues that frequently fall within the purview of the General Assembly or the ECOSOC. Second, the Council’s annual report continues to be a mere statistical compilation of events, a bland summary and listing of meetings and outcome documents which merely informs without educating, illustrates without elucidating. We associate ourselves with such concerns.

As is to be expected, such concerns have led to calls for urgently recalibrating the relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council. The Council would do well to eschew the tendency to give extremely creative and permissive interpretations to the consideration of what constitutes a threat to the peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression and to the situations under which it can take action under Chapter VII. And in terms of its reporting obligations, the Council should not only inform the Assembly of the decisions taken, but also the rationale, efficacy and impact of the Council’s decisions, in terms of crystallized take-aways for the membership.

At the same time, however, we believe that remedial measures would only be half complete in the absence of serious introspection on what the General Assembly itself can do to mitigate the situation. Clearly, the Assembly will not be empowered merely by strengthening procedures. More important is the presence of political will to take concrete measures to reinforce the role and authority of the Assembly. Foremost in this regard is the need to properly appreciate and then correctly situate the Assembly within the plurality of multilateral mechanisms that deal with global issues. In our view, the primacy of the Assembly flows from the universality of its membership as well as the diligent application of the principle of sovereign equality of all its members. Ownership therefore, of the Assembly’s decisions and activities, is reflected in the degree of participation by member-states. So, if there is a foreboding sense of apathy towards the work done in the Assembly, the member-states are also partly to blame.

If the member-states, instead of engaging in substantive deliberations in the six main committees that could result in setting new norms, spend considerable resources on procedural issues they will only encourage the usurpation of their role by other institutions both within and outside the UN. A case in point is the agenda of the Assembly which contains a large number of items which have little or no bearing whatsoever with the most pressing contemporary concerns of relevance to all Member States as well as the international community as a whole. Similarly, there is an embarrassing reluctance to hold thematic debates on issues of relevance to the international community and of concern and interest to the Organization. In our view this is a matter of particular concern since outsourcing of such discussions, especially beyond the UN, militates against the notion of the Assembly’s centrality to multilateralism.

Madam Co-Chair,

I would now like to address two other important issues of relevance to our meeting here today, namely the oversight role of Assembly vis-à-vis the UN staff and as
reflected in the working of the Fifth Committee. In our view the Charter provisions clearly reflect the desire of the UN membership to have an international civil service which displays the highest standards of professionalism, neutrality and integrity and which is accountable therefore, if not in higher, but at least in equal measure as the Secretary General is to the General Assembly. In addition, we would welcome closer consideration of procedures for selecting, appointing and confirming the heads of the major Specialized Agencies, Funds and Programmes with a view to ensuring transparency, legitimacy and balanced representation. Regarding the working of the Fifth Committee, we are of the view that as long as the brooding omnipresence of jobs-related concerns continue to be a major pre-occupation for the international community, the Assembly’s oversight of the allocation of financial resources towards development-related activities should remain sacrosanct. Clearly, the role of the Assembly as the interface between Member-States and the Secretariat should be reinforced so that the policies and priorities set by Members are better reflected and accounted for within the UN machinery.

Madam Co-Chair,

In conclusion, let me re-emphasise the need to discuss substantive measures that would strengthen the role of General Assembly as the chief deliberative, legislative and policy-making and representative body of the international community.

You can expect our constructive support and participation in your efforts.

Thank You.