Statement

by

Ambassador Christian Strohal
Permanent Representative of Austria
to the United Nations in Geneva
at the Thematic Debate on Nuclear Weapons
of the First Committee of the 67th General Assembly

New York, 19 October 2012

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Mr. Chairman,

Austria aligns itself with the European Union statement on nuclear weapons delivered on Wednesday. Austria is fully committed to all measures to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, we have always been convinced by the compelling logic that the only credible and sustainable way to deal with the danger posed by nuclear weapons is through their total elimination.

Allow me therefore to add a few specific Austrian considerations with respect to nuclear disarmament, which also provide the background and the motivation for the draft resolution entitled “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” that we have been working on together with a number of states. I would also like to recall here the reference Austria has made in its general statement to the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, because the delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction often risk to be sidelined in our general discussions. On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Code this year, I have joined, as representative of the Austrian executive secretariat, its current Chairman, Ambassador Hyun Cho of Korea, in transmitting a joint ministerial statement in support of the Code to the UN Secretary-General, calling for further universalization of this important confidence- and transparency-building instrument.

At the outset, I would like to refer to the joint statement on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear weapons, which Switzerland will deliver later during this thematic debate on behalf of a group of states, including my own. As this statement reflects, there is today a greater awareness among states as well as civil society that the nuclear weapons debate should go beyond military security concepts. Due to the catastrophic global effects resulting from the potential use of nuclear weapons, more emphasis should be put on the humanitarian, health and ecological consequences as well as on aspects of international humanitarian law. We look forward to such an intensified discourse, which – in our view – will further strengthen the case for nuclear disarmament.

Looking closely at the effects any use of nuclear weapons would have, also explains why nuclear disarmament may, on the one hand, be the primary responsibility of the nuclear weapons and nuclear armed states, but, on the other hand, cannot be
considered as their sole prerogative, let alone a purely national rather than global security issue.

Nuclear disarmament concerns us all. All states have a right to demand nuclear disarmament. All states have a stake in nuclear disarmament and a responsibility to work towards this goal.

The Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is a key instrument in this regard; it is being challenged on several fronts, and progress on nuclear disarmament – or lack thereof – may be the most serious challenge. The forward looking action plan that was agreed in 2010 may not be perfect. If implemented credibly, however, it would put us on a right track towards a world without nuclear weapons. And all states need to be on board in implementing the necessary steps on the way towards achieving a world free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. It also seems important to achieve clarity within the NPT, and specifically within the current NPT review cycle, on the framework to carry nuclear disarmament forward. In this context, the Middle Powers Initiative is attempting to assist this process with the support of a number of countries, including Austria.

Mr. Chairman,

Moving forward on nuclear disarmament is not only an imperative for the security and survival of us all, it is also an obligation under Article VI of the NPT and has been reconfirmed over and over again, most recently in the 2010 NPT action plan. We would like to reiterate that successful implementation of Actions 6, 7 and 15 requires credible and flexible efforts on the substance of the issues. Our current and well known problems to get a particular forum to work cannot exempt us from trying to make substantive progress. This First Committee is now called upon to try to provide the impetus for breaking the deadlock in multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations. A number of complementary initiatives have been launched. Austria welcomes these efforts. As already pointed out by the EU Statement, we particularly value the initiative aimed at making progress on negotiating a Treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. Austria has itself worked together with Mexico and Norway on a proposal for taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations that we hope delegations will acknowledge as constructive, serious and complementary to other initiatives.
As we have already pointed out, the purpose of the resolution initiative titled “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” is to facilitate substantive multilateral progress in the area of nuclear disarmament through the establishment of an Open-Ended Working Group that would convene in Geneva for up to three weeks during next year. It would be tasked to develop concrete proposals to take forward multilateral negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons.

We have listened carefully to the reactions and comments made by delegations on the draft text that we have put forward for consultations. In light of the discussions we had, it deems important for us to stress that this initiative is intended to provide a forum for constructive substantive work without prejudice to any outcome. Further, this proposal is not about creating a new disarmament institution and by no means intended to undermine the existing ones. On the contrary: This initiative aims at bringing impetus to disarmament negotiations within the established UN framework, notably the General Assembly, in accordance with Article 11 of the Charter of the United Nations. We also stress that the Open-ended Working Group constitutes a format that is well-established, inclusive and has been widely used within the United Nations. The draft resolution text has been amended in order to clarify these points and to accommodate further concerns raised by partners. A revised vision of the draft resolution “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” was tabled yesterday. We hope this resolution initiative will be perceived as an opportunity for the UN disarmament community to overcome the prevailing inertia and move towards substantive disarmament negotiations.

Mr. Chairman,

The challenges the international community has to face with regard to the continued existence of nuclear weapons are enormous. We have been complacent for too long by not pressing to create “a nuclear-weapon free world quickly and effectively”, to use the words of Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger in his appeal addressed to the IAEA General Conference earlier this year. In this spirit, Austria is supporting a number of initiatives and resolutions that will not only make us more alert and aware, but ultimately help the entire UN membership to turn words into action. I thank you, Mr. Chairman.