2015 UNGA First Committee

General Statement

Austria

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Permanent Representative of Austria
to the United Nations Office at Geneva

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Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I would like to join others in congratulating you on your assumption of the chair and assure you of the full support of my delegation. Austria aligns itself with the statement delivered by the European Union earlier during this debate on a broad range of issues such as the successful EU+3 and Iran negotiations on a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the CTBT, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), the Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, Austria would like to highlight our national perspective on the following issues.

Mr. Chairman,

Nuclear weapons continue to pose an existential threat to humankind. On the 70th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations and the first use of these weapons of mass destruction, the international community and the global nuclear weapons discourse are at a threshold about how to address this threat.

On the one hand, recent geopolitical events and - in our view - very disconcerting nuclear rhetoric have only underscored the urgency of nuclear disarmament. Disarmament efforts have fallen far behind expectations and lack credibility. States who continue to stress the importance of nuclear weapons for their own security, while insisting on the unacceptability of these weapons for other States, risk damaging the credibility of the entire nuclear regime. In this context, we consider the long-term nuclear weapons modernization programmes that are under way to be highly disturbing and incompatible with the object and purpose of the NPT and the disarmament obligations and commitments.

On the other hand, there is a growing international attention for the humanitarian consequences and risks of nuclear weapons. The facts, findings and evidence presented in the course of the humanitarian initiative in the past years profoundly challenge the notion that nuclear weapons could be considered as a tool to provide security. The opposite is the case. In light of these findings, the arguments for the retention of nuclear weapons are considered by an increasing number of States as an anachronistic high risk and ultimately irresponsible gamble based on an illusion of security and safety.

The growing momentum behind these conclusions is clearly evidenced by the three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and by the overwhelming support of cross-regional...
statements on this issue, the last one of which was delivered by Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz on behalf of 159 States in April.

As a consequence of the evidence, facts and findings, Austria as host of the Vienna Conference, issued the so-called “Humanitarian Pledge” as a call for urgent nuclear disarmament efforts and to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. We are grateful and very encouraged that the number of countries that have formally endorsed this call for action to date has reached 119. Austria looks forward to working closely with all stakeholders in furthering this initiative to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.

Austria deeply regrets the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference to agree on a course of action that would be commensurate with the sense of urgency for nuclear disarmament that has been demonstrated by the humanitarian initiative. In order to further underscore the imperative for urgent progress, Austria, together with a group of co-sponsors will introduce two resolutions for consideration by the First Committee. Firstly, Draft resolution “Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons” is entirely based on the text of the Joint Statement that was delivered on behalf of 159 countries at the NPT Review Conference 2015 in New York. We consider it necessary to raise the key concerns and arguments expressed in the humanitarian statement through a United Nations General Assembly resolution with the aim of generating broadest possible support.

Secondly, in order to create further momentum and support for the conclusions encapsulated in the “Humanitarian Pledge”, Austria and the co-sponsors introduce Draft Resolution “Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons”. This resolution, too, is entirely based on the text of the Humanitarian Pledge. We look forward to consultations and invite all delegation to support these resolutions.

In addition, Austria is a co-sponsor and would like to register its full support for the resolutions “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” and “Ethical Imperatives for a Nuclear-Weapons Free World.”

Mr. Chairman,

Austria would also highlight specifically the concern about the use of explosive weapons in populated areas as a major cause of civilian harm in many countries. Civilian casualties from explosive weapons in populated areas amounted to more than 40.000 deaths and injuries in
2014 alone, dramatically outweighing military casualties. This is a humanitarian problem of extreme gravity and a severe challenge for the protection of civilians in armed conflict as stipulated by international humanitarian law. This is not a problem that can be restricted to a limited number of conflict zones. The growing numbers of refugees that are currently leaving their war-ridden home regions are a testimony of this. Many people are desperate to find shelter abroad, precisely from the use of explosive weapons and the lack of protection for civilian populations.

Recently, Austria and UN-OCHA convened an international expert meeting on this problem in Vienna with around twenty States, the ICRC, various UN agencies, as well as civil society represented. This meeting highlighted the importance of awareness raising on the basis of continuing collection and dissemination of data, as well as the sharing and promotion of States’ good practices in using explosive weapons. Moreover, significant support was expressed among participants for the proposal of the UN Secretary-General to start working on an international political declaration to prevent civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Mr. Chairman,

Another matter of concern for my country is the prospect of development of lethal autonomous weapons systems. While this may seem a distant threat, technological innovation is moving fast. We risk crossing a very dangerous threshold. We should be very careful to make sure that the use of such weapon systems is consistent with ethical, political and legal imperatives. Therefore Austria advocates a deepening and intensifying of the ongoing international debate and the setting up of a GGE (Group of Governmental Experts).

Finally, Mr. Chairman, UNIDIR’s difficult financial position and lack of predictable funding threatens its very functioning. Austria would like to express its full support for UNIDIR and the important contribution it is making to our work. We would like to encourage this First Committee to take action to ensure UNIDIR’s continued effective functioning and sustainability in the future.

Thank you.