2015 UNGA First Committee

Debate on Nuclear Weapons

Austria

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to the United Nations Office at Geneva

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Mr. Chairman,

Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are foreign policy priorities for Austria. We are of the firm conviction that nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation must be pursued together. We can only effectively prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, if nuclear disarmament and a move away from a nuclear weapons based security concept are pursued with determination and credibility.

The current nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation suffers from an inherent legitimacy deficit which needs to be addressed. This deficit stems from the fact that some States continue to insist on the importance of nuclear weapons for their own security, while stressing the unacceptability of these weapons for other States. We fully subscribe to the words of the Secretary General that “there are no right hands for the wrong weapons”.

Austria has been closely involved for many years in several efforts and initiatives to promote progress on both, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We are particularly encouraged by the strong international momentum and increased focus on the humanitarian consequences and risks of nuclear weapons. The facts, findings and evidence presented in the course of the humanitarian initiative have shown their catastrophic consequences and associated risks providing a powerful set of arguments for disarmament and non-proliferation alike. The humanitarian focus is thus maybe the best hope to shore up support for the NPT and to create and maintain a strong nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. It should be seen as a wakeup call and as an issue that unites the international community into urgent and determined action away from a reliance on nuclear weapons. In this spirit, Austria has the pleasure to introduce two new resolutions to this First Committee.

The first Draft Resolution that Austria has submitted together with a large group of co-sponsors is entitled “Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons”.

Between 2012 and 2015 several cross regional statement on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament were delivered, either in the context of NPT meetings or during the UNGA 1st Committee Sessions. The support for these statements increased continuously over these years. The latest such statement was delivered by Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz during the 2015 NPT Review Conference on behalf of 159 States. To our knowledge, this is the largest group of States ever supporting a cross-regional substantive statement in the United Nations.

In order to underscore the urgent need for such progress and the importance of a strong focus on the discussions on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, Austria and the co-sponsors consider it important 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. The Draft Resolution is entirely based on the Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons as delivered on behalf of 159 Countries at the NPT Review Conference 2015 in New York.

In particular, it
- Stresses that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances;
- Emphasises that the only way to guarantee that nuclear weapons will never be used again is through their total elimination;
- Stresses that the catastrophic effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, whether by accident, miscalculation or design, cannot be adequately addressed;
- Calls upon all States in their shared responsibility to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, to prevent their vertical and horizontal proliferation and to achieve nuclear disarmament;
- Urges States to exert all efforts to totally eliminate the threat of these weapons of mass destruction;

Austria and the co-sponsors would like to invite all States to support this draft resolution and to consider co-sponsorship.

Let me also comment to expressed concerns about some elements of this resolution. In its preambular part, the resolution recalls all humanitarian statements that have been delivered in the past years. In addition, operative paragraph 4 expresses its firm belief that awareness of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons must underpin all approaches and efforts towards nuclear disarmament. These elements are included explicitly to underscore the inclusive spirit of this resolution, also to those States who have not supported the joint statement on behalf of 159 States. Moreover, several States have said that they cannot agree to the notion that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances. Preventing any such use is undoubtedly in the interest of humanity and this reference is not intended as a legal interpretation.

Mr. Chairman, the second draft resolution that I would like to introduce on behalf of Austria and a large group of co-sponsors is entitled “Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons”.

The facts based discussions and the evidence presented in the course at the three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons underscored the urgency of concrete progress on nuclear disarmament. In particular, it was highlighted that the immediate, mid- and long-term consequences of nuclear weapon explosions would be significantly graver than it was understood in the past and that the risks associated with nuclear weapons are also significantly greater than previously assumed. Moreover, humanitarian organisations, such as from the UN system and the ICRC, clarified that no national or international capacity exists capable of adequately responding to the humanitarian harm that would result from a nuclear weapon explosion in a populated area.

In light of these important facts and findings that had been presented, Austria, as host of the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, drew a set of conclusions and issued a national commitment, the “Austrian Pledge”. To date, 119 countries have formally endorsed and/or associated themselves with this commitment, which was renamed “Humanitarian Pledge” in May 2015 to underscore its international character.

The Draft Resolution is entirely based on the “Humanitarian Pledge. In particular, it
Stresses the importance of presenting the evidence on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons to all relevant fora as they should be at the center of all deliberations and the implementation of obligations and commitments with regard to nuclear disarmament;

**Urges** all States parties to the NPT to renew their commitment to the urgent and full implementation of existing obligations under Article VI, and calls upon all States to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons and to cooperate with all stakeholders to achieve this goal;

**Requests** that all States possessing nuclear weapons, pending the total elimination of their nuclear weapon arsenals, take concrete interim measures to reduce the risk of nuclear weapon detonations;

**Calls upon** all relevant stakeholders, to cooperate in efforts to stigmatize, prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in light of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences and associated risks;

Austria and the co-sponsors hope to receive the broadest possible support for the conclusions encapsulated in the “Humanitarian Pledge”.

Mr. Chairman, let me address briefly the point raised by some delegations that contest that there is a legal gap. Unlike for other weapons of mass destruction, there is as yet no universal and comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons. The NPT prohibits nuclear weapons for the non-nuclear weapon States. It currently does not prohibit nuclear weapons for the nuclear weapon States and some States are outside the NPT regime. The nuclear weapon State status under the NPT is, however, neither unconditional nor intended to be granted for the indefinite future.

Also the step-by-step approach recognises a legal gap to achieve the objective of Article VI. Prohibiting nuclear tests and the fissile material for nuclear weapons would be ways to fill the legal gap. The CTBT, has not entered into force despite overwhelming international support and a fully functioning and proven verification regime. The prohibition of fissile material has lost much of its relevance with the States in question having used almost 20 years of dysfunction in the Conference on Disarmament to stock up on fissile material that the disarmament value of any future treaty would be diminished. At the same time, long-term nuclear weapons modernization programmes are under way in NPT Nuclear Weapon States and States outside of the NPT. These developments are highly disturbing and incompatible with the object and purpose of the NPT and the disarmament obligations and commitments and run counter to the professed objective of a world without nuclear weapons. For these reasons, additional measures and efforts are necessary to achieve a world without nuclear weapons. This is why we consider it evident that there is a legal gap for the prohibition and elimination and that we need to cooperate with all stakeholders to fill this gap.

Mr. Chairman, one way to do this is to explore in detail and with determination effective legal measures to achieve nuclear disarmament, in particular new legal provisions and norms to attain and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. For this reason, Austria fully supports and is a co-sponsor of draft resolution “Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations”. Another way to address this is to underscore the ethical responsibility for all States to act with urgency and determination to take effective measures for the elimination and prohibition of nuclear
weapons. For this reason, Austria also fully supports and co-sponsors the draft resolution on “Ethical Imperative for a Nuclear Weapons Free World”.

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 has an obligation to act.