United Nations Disarmament Commission

Statement Nuclear Cluster

AUSTRIA

delivered by

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to the United Nations in Geneva

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Mr. Chairman,

As is well known, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are foreign policy priorities for Austria. These two elements represent a careful balance reflected in the Non-Proliferation Treaty and must be pursued in parallel.

Austria has praised the considerable reductions of the nuclear arsenals of the most nuclear armed states over the past decades. All the more we regret that this positive trend has come to a standstill and we appeal to them to resume destroying nuclear weapons with a view to their elimination.

Recent developments – such as the DPRK’s fifth nuclear test – show us that proliferation is happening even today and it is high time to stop such behaviour. Real progress in nuclear disarmament from the side of the States in possession of nuclear weapons will help to remove a stimulus for some other States to acquire such weapons in the first place, directly benefitting the NPT’s non-proliferation objective. It is regrettable that more than 46 years after the entry into force of the NPT, states still continue modernisation and stockpile maintenance programmes of nuclear weapons resulting in qualitative proliferation.

Austria has been consistently striving to further the NPT objective contained in Article 6 – both through support for the CTBT and bringing about a FMCT – and also through more recent initiatives focussing on the humanitarian consequences and risks of nuclear weapons. We are very encouraged by the strong focus and determination that has followed the humanitarian initiative’s findings on the catastrophic consequences and associated risks, informing also this year’s Open Ended Working Group in Geneva and its excellent report. It is now up to us in this First Committee to address its clear recommendations.

With this in mind, Austria Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa are tabling the resolution “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” again this year, containing as a new element the recommendation by the Open-Ended Working Group “to convene a conference in 2017, open to all States, with the participation and contribution of international organizations and civil society, to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination”. This would represent not only a major step forward, a core contribution towards nuclear disarmament and an important step towards regaining balance in the currently uneven implementation of NPT obligations. It would also constitute the basis on which the necessary system to ensure the complete and verified implementation of the ultimate objective of a world free from nuclear weapons could subsequently be established.
Furthermore, Austria, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa are again tabling the resolution on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons and the resolution on the Ethical Imperative for a Nuclear Weapons Free World with some technical updates. The resolution on the Humanitarian Consequences is based entirely 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. The resolution on the Ethical Imperative addresses the ethical responsibility for all States to act with urgency and determination to take effective measures for the elimination and prohibition of nuclear weapons.

And lastly, the same group of sponsors will also table the resolution on the Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons again. The Humanitarian Pledge to date is formally supported by 127 countries. As you may know, the pledge contains a call 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. The pledge group further refined its position in a working paper to the Open-Ended Working Group by calling “upon all States to pursue an additional legal instrument or instruments with urgency and to support international efforts to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons”. This has been reflected in the updated draft.

Austria and the co-sponsors invite all States to support these four draft resolutions and to consider co-sponsorship.

Mr. Chairman,

During discussions of this committee so far, a number of questions related to our draft resolutions were raised.

First of all, the point was raised whether a prohibition treaty would be compatible with the NPT as the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. In our view, the suggested treaty would be not only fully consistent with the NPT, but moreover will constitute major progress in and facilitate its implementation, in particular article VI. For non-nuclear weapons States as defined by the NPT, it would make their existing commitment not to pursue nuclear weapons even stronger. While the NPT accepts the possession of nuclear weapons by five particular states, it is clear that the NPT is not meant to be a static treaty allowing for indefinite possession. Rather the goal of global nuclear disarmament is clearly laid out. By signing up and ratifying the additional norm, these countries will be living up to their disarmament obligation under article VI.
The argument is often heard that nuclear deterrence is indispensable for national security. Austria does not believe this. If this were to be the case, then more states could feel the need to follow the same logic and want to acquire these weapons. We would embark on a dangerous path. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapons use – be it intentional or accidental – could not be contained and would inevitably fall back on the users themselves. So in a sober analysis the possession of nuclear weapons appears to be a security liability. Fortunately, this is the view not only of my country, but of the overwhelming majority of States, which have no designs to acquire nuclear weapons and manage to put their national security successfully on a more humane and rational basis, than the threat to in extremis commit collective suicide at planetary scale. The examples of States which once had designs to acquire nuclear weapons, or the weapons themselves, and after careful examination of the pros and cons decided to abandon them are highly instructive in this context.

Some voices claim that negotiating a prohibition convention would be an unrealistic option. We do not believe that a negotiating process with the participation of the majority of states lacks credibility nor realism. No similar legally-binding instrument has started with universality, so we cannot expect this here, either.

We are also realistic that the elimination of nuclear weapons is not something which can be achieved overnight and by way of a prohibition convention alone. Rather, it would lay the basis on which the necessary system to ensure its complete and verified implementation could subsequently be established. As experience with legally-binding instruments dealing with weapons of mass destruction has shown, we first create a legal norm and then concrete practical and legal steps for its implementation have to follow. Take chemical and biological weapons, antipersonnel mines, cluster munitions: all those have started being eliminated following the adoption of a prohibition treaty. There is no reason why an analogous approach should not be successful with nuclear weapons..

Austria fully supports all legal and practical measures that contribute to the overarching goal of achieving a world free from nuclear weapons, such as entry into force and universalization of the CTBT, the negotiation of an FMCT, the elaboration of effective verification tools for nuclear disarmament, the granting of negative security assurances and no first use policies by nuclear weapons States, measures for de-alerting, deemphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines and other measures. It is our belief, that all these measures can and have to be pursued simultaneously with the establishment of a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons.

It was always clear that that a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons will be needed to attain and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. So what would we win by postponing the start of such negotiations? Is nuclear disarmament not urgent?

Thank you.