First Committee

Cluster „Conventional Weapons“

Statement by Austria

delivered by

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Mr. Chair,

Austria aligns herself with the statement delivered by the European Union. Allow me to add some additional points of particular importance for my country.

Let me start by welcoming the Secretary General’s Disarmament Agenda and his call to step up efforts to pursue disarmament to save lives and protect future generations. We concur that for the benefit of all we need to make best use of the disarmament toolbox as part of an integrated approach bringing together humanitarian, legal, ethical and development considerations. To create a safer world for all, it is essential to uphold and fully implement the instruments and mechanisms agreed. Instead of destroying these achievements we should add on issues where there is a need in response to new developments. This is of particular relevance in the context of changing dynamics of warfare and scientific and technological progress.

The fact that the today’s conflicts are increasingly taking place in urban areas entails particular challenges for the protection of civilians in armed conflict. To reduce the humanitarian impact of urban warfare we are all called upon to do our utmost to uphold the rules based international order by respecting international law and in particular international humanitarian law. We would be ill advised if we turned a blind eye to actions that undermine the important principles of proportionality, distinction, the prohibition of unnecessary suffering and the required precautions in attack.

The humanitarian harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas is a particular concern. The problem stems from how those weapons are used in many instances. When more than 90% of victims are civilians, our common principles of IHL are seriously challenged. The short and long-term humanitarian effects cause far too many direct victims but also make affected areas de facto uninhabitable. The urban context is reinforcing the reverberating effects. These effects are among the root causes for people being internally displaced or having to flee their countries. The growing awareness about the challenges posed by the use of EWIPA is demonstrated not only by the increasing number of dedicated discussions in various fora, but also by the large number of states supporting the first joint statement on the issue. I want to thank Ireland for having led this initiative.
Austria reaffirms its commitment to reduce the devastating humanitarian harm caused by EWIPA. We call on all states to avoid, or in any event minimize the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas. We welcome the continued support of the Secretary-General for our efforts to develop a political declaration and his ambition to improve data collection on collateral harm, as also outlined in the Disarmament Agenda. Let me seize the opportunity to commend and underline the importance of the contributions and comprehensive first-hand experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross and civil society to our efforts to better protect civilians.

Mr Chair,

There can be no doubt about the international obligation that any weapon, be it explosive weapons, armed drones or other weapons systems should be used in accordance with IHL.

As the Secretary General outlined in his disarmament agenda, new and emerging weapon technologies pose challenges to existing legal, humanitarian and ethical norms, non-proliferation; international stability, and peace and security. These questions have not yet been sufficiently addressed. The potential impact of technological progress, in particular artificial intelligence, on international law and international humanitarian law deserves increased attention by the international community. Austria firmly believes that humans must always retain control over the critical functions of weapon systems, namely targeting and attacking. We call upon the international community to join us in the efforts to bring about a legally binding instrument to ensure that autonomous weapons remain under meaningful human control before such systems are introduced to the battlefield.

Mr Chair,

This year we are celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the Cluster Munition Convention. Thousands of lives and limbs have been saved by the growing support to this convention and to its sister instrument, the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention. Both conventions include important victim assistance provisions to ensure that victims can take full part in societies. Austria is encouraged by the progress achieved and will continue to work towards the goal of ending the scourge of anti-personal mines, including improvised APMs, and cluster munitions.

I thank you.