First Committee General Statement

AUSTRIA

delivered by

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New York, 8 October 2018

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At the outset, I would like to congratulate you and the Bureau on your election and assure you of my delegation’s full support.

Austria is aligned with the statement of the European Union

Mr. Chair,

Peace and security cannot be achieved without disarmament. And progress on disarmament is needed most urgently at a time when mutual trust is eroding, major arms control treaties are under pressure, and the human cost of armed conflict and violence is reaching levels not seen in a generation, hampering sustainable development. The UN Secretary General’s “Disarmament Agenda” appeals to the strength of multilateralism and provides us with a concrete compass of disarmament measures. We welcome his strong call to action and will engage in translating this Agenda into action, also as a champion on some priorities. Partnership among States, international and regional organisations and civil society is crucial. Let us use this very Committee to make tangible progress towards this end.

Urgent action is needed on nuclear disarmament. Tensions between nuclear weapons states have reached a new peak in an even more complex and fragile environment than during the Cold War. We are confronted with a new cycle of modernisation and upgrading of arsenals, development of faster delivery systems and attempts to make nuclear weapons easier to use. And as Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, remarked on the occasion of the International Day for the total elimination of nuclear weapons: “Let’s not lose sight of what nuclear weapons represent: The threat to indiscriminately kill hundreds of thousands of people and cause horrific humanitarian suffering for many more. Nuclear weapons pose an existential threat also to all other states, since their catastrophic humanitarian consequences do not know any borders”.

Hence, nuclear disarmament is a humanitarian imperative. It is enshrined in the NPT, the cornerstone of our non-proliferation and disarmament regime, and we must ensure that the legal obligations of the NPT are fully implemented and the normative realm of the Treaty is preserved. The TPNW is an important contribution to achieve exactly this. After decades of stalemate in the field of multilateral nuclear
disarmament, it provides a legal pathway for the full implementation of Article VI of the NPT. As the President of the ICRC, Peter Maurer, stated on the occasion of the high-level TPNW ceremony on 26 September, “by signing and ratifying the Treaty, States are sending a clear signal that any use, threat of use or possession of these weapons is unacceptable in humanitarian, moral, and now legal terms.” The TPNW follows the same objective as the NPT, it is fully compatible and complementary with the NPT and it strengthens the IAEA safeguards system based on the NPT. As such, the TPNW constitutes an essential element of the international non-proliferation and disarmament regime to achieve a nuclear weapon free world, which will bring more security for all. With currently 69 signatures and 19 ratifications, the TPNW is well on its way to a swift entry into force. I call on all States that have not already done so to accede to this historic treaty.

The CTBT is another landmark treaty in support of the full implementation of the NPT. We warmly welcome the ratification of Thailand and signing by Tuvalu. We appeal to all states that have not yet done so to urgently sign and ratify the Treaty, and in particular those States whose ratifications are required for entry into force.

Mr. Chair,
The international non-proliferation regime has been seriously challenged by the DPRK’s nuclear and missile programmes. We welcome the successful recent inter-Korean high level talks and the historic Singapore Summit between the US and DPRK and encourage all parties involved to continue build trust and make concrete progress on the path towards a complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the DPRK. It is central that the DPRK return to compliance with its international obligations under UN Security Council resolutions, return to (compliance with) the NPT and IAEA Safeguards and ratify the CTBT without delay.

The JCPOA is critical for reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and globally. The negotiations which were concluded in 2015 in Vienna provide an encouraging example of effective multilateralism. For these reasons we deeply regret the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA. We reiterate our commitment to work with the international community to preserve the agreement. The JCPOA underlines the indispensable role that the IAEA has in verifying compliance. The
IAEA has reported that Iran has continued to implement its nuclear-related commitments, and it must continue to do so. Alongside Iran’s implementation of its nuclear-related commitments, the lifting of sanctions constitutes an essential part of the JCPOA.

Global nuclear non-proliferation must go hand in hand with nuclear disarmament. The prolonged existence of nuclear weapons as manifest in costly modernization programmes, statements proclaiming the usability of nuclear weapons, as well as the recent lack of progress in further nuclear disarmament feeds nuclear proliferation and is detrimental to fulfilling our development goals.

Mr. Chair,

Austria condemns, in the strongest terms, the use of any weapons of mass destruction, including the use of any toxic chemicals as weapons. There can be no impunity for the use of these abhorrent weapons and those responsible must be held accountable. In this context, Austria supports the recent decision by the CWC Conference of States Parties to enhance the OPCW’s capacity to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons and is committed to contributing to its implementation. Austria is proud to have joined the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons.

Austria is appalled by the repeated use of chemical weapons by both the Syrian Arab Republic and by Da’esh. Austria also reiterates its condemnation of the attacks in Salisbury, Malaysia and Iraq.

Mr Chair,

Austria welcomes the Secretary General’s vision of disarmament saving lives. The Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Cluster Munition Convention are outstanding examples of effective multilateralism that saved thousands of lives, recognized victims’ rights and returned contaminated areas to the benefit of communities. Austria calls on those States which have not yet done so to accede to these two important conventions. Austria is concerned by the use of cluster munitions, outlawed by the Cluster Munitions Convention, in the conflict in Yemen.
and by the new use of anti-personnel mines, mostly by non-state actors, in Iraq, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Still far too many people across the globe fall victim to conventional weapons. A prime lever for progress is to regulate arms exports. Therefore we welcome that the ATT has entered into force remarkably quickly. We pursue its universalisation and thorough national implementation. The ATT is also historic for bringing the gender dimension into a security related treaty. We are in favour of dedicating more weight and consideration to gender aspects not only in our speeches here, but even more so in the implementation of disarmament treaties.

Mr. Chair,
throughout history, warfare has always been closely linked to technological innovation. The potential impact of technological progress, in particular artificial intelligence, on international law and international humanitarian law deserves more attention. Despite the progress achieved during the GGE on LAWS this year, the ethical, political and legal questions posed by autonomous weapons have not yet been sufficiently addressed. It is not acceptable that autonomous systems target and attack without human intervention. In the context of autonomous weapon systems the international community is called upon to act before diplomacy is overtaken by facts. To address undesirable developments in the near future, Austria is proposing a legally binding instrument to ensure human control over critical functions in autonomous weapon systems.

Today conflicts are increasingly taking place in urban areas. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is therefore a particular concern to my country. The use of explosive weapons by armed forces but also by non-State actors in conflicts all over the world constitutes grave violations of international humanitarian law, resulting in tens of thousands of civilian deaths annually. 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. We cannot ignore that these effects are among the root causes for people being internally displaced or even having to flee their countries. Austria therefore 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 in populated areas.

Over the last years the role of international organizations and civil society has become increasingly important in setting and implementing the rules based global order. Austria welcomes the expertise and engagement of the ICRC, civil society and academics enriching our joint efforts. The important contributions of our partners to international peace and security have been highlighted by awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons twenty years after the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was Nobel Peace Prize laureate.