STATEMENT

BY

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DURING THE HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE UN
CONFERENCE TO NEGOTIATE A LEGALLY-BINDING
INSTRUMENT TO PROHIBIT NUCLEAR WEAPONS
LEADING TOWARDS THEIR TOTAL ELIMINATION

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Madam President,

Let me from the outset join other delegations in congratulating you, Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gómez, on your election as President of the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally-Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards Their Total Elimination. I wish to assure you of South Africa's full support and co-operation towards fulfilling the mandate of this Conference.

My delegation aligns itself with the statements delivered by the distinguished representatives of Cape Verde on behalf of the Africa Group.

Madam President,

Since the dawn of its democracy in 1994, South Africa has placed greater priority to multilateralism as the best way to deal with issues of international peace and security, and as the only country to date to have voluntarily eliminated its nuclear weapons, South Africa has been an ardent supporter of nuclear disarmament. Our experience, clearly demonstrated that the very existence of nuclear weapons means that humanity continues to face the peril of a nuclear catastrophe and all States have the shared responsibility to prevent the use of such weapons by any actor under any circumstances. Together with the vast majority of States, South Africa believes that the only guarantee against the use or threat of use posed by nuclear weapons is their total elimination and legally-binding assurances that they will never be produced again.

Madam President,

The argument that nuclear weapons are indispensable for the security of some States, but not for others, is not only illogical, but it is morally unethical and lacks credibility. The resistance by Nuclear Armed States to fulfill their disarmament obligations and commitments has caused serious divisions among States and created a credibility crisis in the nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation regime. Consequently, the 20-year stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament and the lack of progress in the UN Disarmament Commissions in particular has negatively impacted on multilateralism and has become a source of growing frustration among the vast majority of UN Member States.

Madam President,

Since joining the NPT in 1991 as a non-nuclear-weapon State, South Africa has played an active role in promoting the inextricably linked pillars of the Treaty and their balanced implementation. We have for many years cautioned against a selective approach and expressed concern regarding the lack of equal attention to the disarmament obligations under Article VI of the Treaty.
My country has also been an active participant in the humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons since its inception in 2010 when some NPT States Parties again felt the necessity to prepare for the unthinkable possibilities of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. Over the last 7 years, the initiative gained wide support, with around 160 States declaring that nuclear weapons should never be used again, under any circumstances, while around 130 States having committed towards filling the legal gap for the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

While we had hoped that this initiative would unite all States around the imperatives for urgent movement on nuclear disarmament and assist in breaking the two decade-long deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament, it is regrettable that most nuclear-weapon States (NWS) decided not to engage in the discussion. Some non-nuclear-weapon States also delivered joint statements recognising the consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation, but rejecting the aspiration for nuclear weapons never to be used again “under any circumstances”, which they argue contradict their security policies under “extended deterrence”. It is somewhat ironic that some of these States decided to ignore the security dimension of the humanitarian initiative, which illustrated that nuclear weapons are of interest and a security concern for all States and peoples of world, and not just for the few possessing such inhumane and indiscriminate instruments.

Madam President,

This Conference, in our view constitutes a major milestone in the history of nuclear disarmament and the only reason for our presence here today is to negotiate an instrument that will prohibit nuclear weapons. While nuclear weapons have been subjected to regional prohibitions through Nuclear-Free-Zones such as the Pelindaba Treaty, this would be the first international legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons, the only weapon of mass destruction yet to be subjected to a global prohibition. This Conference is therefore indeed a historic event.

Madam President,

The negotiations during this Conference will allow all States to finally give concrete effect to the aspirations expressed in the very first resolution A/RES/1 adopted by the UN General Assembly more than 70 years ago. It is worth recalling the significant progress made towards the elimination of all chemical and biological weapons through international prohibitions. We therefore welcome this Conference as a significant step towards subjecting nuclear weapons to the same international norms as the other categories of weapons of mass destruction. In South Africa’s view, such a treaty is both a practical and achievable step towards filling a glaring gap in the international legal architecture pertaining to the legality of nuclear weapons. Our support for such a step is without prejudice to the realisation of existing nuclear disarmament commitments, particularly those agreed to in the NPT context, including negotiations on other partial measures.
Madam President,

We hope that all States will seize this historic opportunity to engage in good faith in negotiations on effective measures. Contrary to the argument advanced by some, the negotiations on and conclusion of an international legally-binding instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons cannot undermine the security interests of any State. A higher norm on nuclear weapons can only strengthen international security and advance the security of a world without such weapons.

It is for this reason that South Africa supports a comprehensive prohibition that is based on principles and rules of the International Humanitarian Law and the UN Charter. South Africa views the ban treaty as an important step towards achieving the ultimate goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. In this context, South Africa will further elaborate on the key elements of the future prohibition treaty during the thematic debates.

In conclusion, Madam President, my delegation looks forward to working with you and all delegations towards the successful conclusion of an effective, non-discriminatory, international, legally-binding treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons, leading to their total elimination.

I thank you.