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United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, leading towards their total Elimination

Statement

by

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Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Friends,

Over the past decades the international community has outlawed weapons that cause unnecessary suffering - chemical and biological weapons, landmines and cluster munitions. These weapons were banned because their consequences were considered ethically inhuman.

We know the consequences of a nuclear explosion.

We have seen the pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

We have heard the Hibakusha.

Why would the logic that applied to the prohibition of chemical and biological weapons, to landmines and cluster munitions, not apply to nuclear weapons (NW) – to weapons the use of which would cause much more harm; weapons that could wipe out life on earth?

In 2014 Austria organized a Conference in Vienna to seek answers to this question. We invited experts to examine and discuss the risks and dangers of NW based on the latest available information.

For most who attended - I recognize several here this morning – the conference was a sobering wake-up call about the real risks involved with NW today.

- We learned that the short, medium and long-term consequences of a NW explosion are significantly graver than previously understood.
- We learned that the potential geographical scope of contaminated territory after a detonation was much larger than previously expected.
- We learned about the countless times there had almost been a nuclear incident due to computer errors, mistakes or accidents at storage facilities.
- We learned from mathematicians who calculate risk that due to the gravity of the consequences of nuclear war, it is statistically more likely that our children will die from the consequences of a nuclear explosion than from a car crash.
- In sum, we learned that we were hugely underestimating the risks associated with NW.

The Conference in Vienna in 2014 showed in stunning clarity that NW carry a risk that is in no way commensurate with their purported advantages. We came away from that conference with the certainty that we must reduce that risk and that the only way to reduce that risk was the prohibition of such weapons through a legally binding instrument.

This led many of us on a journey that brings us together here today.

And many it is: I am proud and humbled to see such a large number of States assembled in this hall this morning.

It shows the broad, the global support for a prohibition of NW.

Mme President,

While it is gratifying to see so many States here today, it remains unfortunate that several are absent. Not all States are convinced of our initiative yet. Several important partners - in particular Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) - have concerns.

We must take these concerns very seriously and we must actively address them. Because we have compelling arguments to convince our partners that we are right; and

Because we need all States to join our initiative if we want to be successful and reduce the risk of NW to zero.

So let me very briefly turn to some of these concerns:

1) Some say NW are here to stay; that it is impossible to de-invent NW. Well, de-inventing NW is not necessary; prohibition suffices. From other weapon prohibition treaties we know that we can set up treaty regimes with strict verification controls. In the nuclear field, the NPT-system and the JCPOA established complex verification mechanisms that can be built on and expanded. Independent experts have elaborated highly sophisticated blue prints for comprehensive safeguard systems.

And don't forget: The prohibition treaty is just one element; a necessary first step, that would need to be complemented by a comprehensive set of additional sequenced measures to achieve the total elimination of NW.

We know that will take time. But that should not deter us. We should take the first step by laying out the goal of the process – the legal prohibition of NW.

2) Another concern is that a prohibition of NW could reduce security.

Let me be very clear: Nobody in this room wants to make any State less secure or any person less safe, whether they come from a NWS or a NNWS.

Indeed, every State – including every NWS and every umbrella State - would be more secure and their people would be safer if no State had NWs.

This is an important argument to make. Because it's very clear: Our final goal of a world without nuclear weapons can only be achieved if NWS participate. Only they can disarm. We can't.

And NWS will only do so if they feel they will gain more security. So we must demonstrate that it is possible to gain more security by joining this initiative.

We must explain, that no single NWS will be asked to unilaterally disarm. What we seek is a general legal prohibition and once we have that, then will we establish – together with the NWS – a system of eliminating NW together.

One more point in this context: The argument that NWs are indispensable for security runs counter to the many commitments in the NPT context. If NW were truly indispensable in providing security, then why should not all States benefit from this advantage? If we follow the argument that NW make the world safer, would that not imply that more weapons for more States would be better?

We do not believe that argument.

Clearly, we will only be safer with less NW, with no NW.

Only that would bring more security for everyone.

3) Another concern is the relationship of the prohibition treaty to the NPT.

In 2015 we witnessed once again a humiliating failure of the NPT regime. Still: it remains the best system of nuclear security that we have, the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime.

So we must protect and strengthen the NPT.

That's what our prohibition treaty will do: it will not only be fully compatible with the NPT, it will build on Art VI and contribute to its implementation.

It will therefore not weaken the NPT; quite the contrary: it will strengthen it.

4) Finally we often hear that this is not the right time for such an initiative.

We have been waiting for progress on nuclear disarmament (ND) since 1997. For the last 20 years, the Conference on Disarmament has not been able to agree on a program of work. The Action Plan agreed at the NPT Review Conference in 2010 which contains concrete actions on ND that all NPT States agreed to – including the NWS - still awaits implementation.

Whenever we asked, we were told that the time was not right for ND.

Either times were good, then there was no need for that; then times were difficult with elections or the financial crisis or geopolitical tensions.

Frankly, it never seems to be the right time.

If we look at history, we can see that ND occurred during the Cold War and during postwar peace; from history we learn that there was ND when political leadership was determined to achieve progress.

Today's international security environment may be challenging but this should not serve as an excuse. At the height of the Cold War, the leaders of the USA and the USSR engaged in bilateral nuclear disarmament talks, enabling the START and INF treaties.

Let us also not forget that what we seek is strictly speaking not a "Disarmament Treaty". This is a process to prohibit a type of weapon that carries enormous risks and, when detonated, can cause enormous human suffering,

There is no "wrong time" for that.

And quite frankly: if you look at the risks – what is the alternative?

Is doing nothing a better strategy?

Some ask: Why go through all the hassle? Just lean back and wait for a nuclear accident, wait for a terrorist detonation. Then States will come together and ban NW.

I refuse to accept that. Waiting for disaster is no strategy.

That is disrespectful of the victims of NW, past and future.

There is a right time to begin the process of prohibiting NW. That time is now.

Mme President,

If I may, one last point on procedure:

I would like to thank the members of civil society who have worked for years, decades on the prohibition of NW.

It is largely thanks to your dedication, expertise and perseverance that we are here today. It is an honor and privilege to work together with you.

My thanks also goes to the many colleagues in the UN-Secretariat and in other IOs, such as the CTBTO, and to many Gov. delegates who have been working in the arms control sector around the world.

But I also have a request to all the friends assembled in this room.
This is one of those rare opportunities where we could make history.
We could also stumble and miss this opportunity.
There is a risk that we want to achieve too much.
There is a risk we get distracted and lose sight of our goal.
There is a risk that we try to satisfy individual national political agendas.

Everyone has national interests. Everyone can make this process difficult or easy

My request to you dear friends: Please, stay together behind this one, narrow, clear objective:
A legal prohibition of NW.

We will only succeed if we are disciplined, if we put the common goal ahead of the national agenda.

Everything else can come later. It will have to come, if we are to succeed.

But here and now, we must focus just on this one goal: the prohibition of NW.

If we don't, if we succumb to temptation, if we get tangled up in individual national priorities – we will most likely fail.

That may not be the end of the world.

But with NW involved, it may be just that.

Thank you.