International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

Speech by H.E. Alexander Schallenberg
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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address you on behalf of Austria at the occasion of the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. Complete nuclear disarmament is a top foreign policy priority of Austria.

Austria was one of the first countries to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Therefore, this day is of special significance for Austria. Let us be frank: Nuclear disarmament has in practice ground to halt and – worse – is being partially reversed. The threat for a nuclear confrontation has increased:

The end of the INF Treaty endangers peace and security worldwide. In Europe, it reduces the reaction time for nuclear attacks to mere minutes. There is a danger that the New START Treaty will lapse. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a diplomatic breakthrough in non-proliferation, is hanging at a thread.

To make things worse, new nuclear weapons are being developed costing hundreds of billions of dollars with the aim of making them even more lethal. Even so-called small tactical nuclear weapons, designed to be “more useable” are of a similar size to those detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. New delivery systems are being deployed reducing reaction times and increasing the risks for fatal errors and escalation.

This despite the fact that the concept of nuclear deterrence simply does not stand up to scrutiny. We all know that. These weapons pose an existential threat to all states because their catastrophic humanitarian consequences respect no borders.

The deterrence argument also ignores recent technological developments. Are current systems sufficiently shielded against cyber-attacks? Can nuclear weapons be hacked? How do we deal with the weaponization of artificial intelligence?
We all have to be aware that all these developments and challenges exponentially increase the risk of escalation and miscalculation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The case for the total elimination of nuclear weapons is clear. And it is one that is supported by the majority of countries: 122 of them voted two years ago for the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. A historic breakthrough.

Today, we have crossed the halfway-point to the 50 ratifications required for the entry into force. With every additional signature and ratification, states send the powerful signal that having a say on nuclear weapons is not exclusive to states who possess them. The security of all our citizens is equally important and equally at risk. We are, of course, under no illusion that the Treaty will immediately reduce risks or decimate nuclear weapons stockpiles. But it is an essential step. Let us not lose heart.

Just as with the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines or the Convention on Cluster Munitions the road ahead of us is still long. But if we continue to act together we will finally achieve our goal: to prohibit and eliminate the most dangerous class of weapons of mass destruction.

I call on all states to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and to contribute to building a world free of nuclear weapons.

I thank you for your attention.