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**Statement**

**by**

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**at the**

**High Level Meeting of the General Assembly**

**on Nuclear Disarmament**

**New York, 26 September 2013**

Mr. President,  
Mr. Secretary General,  
Excellences,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Dear representatives of civil society,

## **1) Introduction**

Next year we will commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. Among the many momentous developments that were set in motion by this war, there is one particular 20<sup>th</sup> Century legacy that we are still struggling to overcome: the development of weapons of mass destruction, with the first use of chemical weapons in 1915 and later the detonations of the two nuclear weapons in Japan in 1945.

The existence of nuclear weapons and their potential to inflict almost unimaginable catastrophic global consequences raises profound questions about our own human nature, about morality and ethical standards, the fundamental principles of international law and about the manner in which international relations and security can and should be organized.

The lesson that Austria learned from its own complex historical experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that multilateral cooperation is the key to finding solutions to global challenges. This has been our policy since joining the United Nations in 1955, eager to make a constructive contribution to a peaceful world order. Nuclear weapons are such a global challenge and the reason for our meeting today.

Yesterday, 52 years ago, on 25 September 1961, U.S. President Kennedy delivered a landmark address before this very Assembly stating that nuclear weapons must be abolished before they abolish us. He invoked the vivid notion of a nuclear sword of Damocles “(...) *hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness.*” Kennedy’s words date from an era of severe ideological confrontation between East and West, when nuclear weapons were considered by many almost as inevitable to maintain a balance between them.

Today, more than twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the survival of our species continues to be threatened by nuclear weapons. Despite some progress, our collective efforts to move away from the nuclear abyss have thus far remained too modest in ambition and too limited in success.

A world without nuclear weapons is a goal shared by all humanity. To achieve it, we need a reinvigorated and broader debate on nuclear weapons. Today's HLM on nuclear disarmament is an excellent opportunity to give urgency, focus and new momentum to this long held goal.

## **II) Humanitarian consequences should be at the core of the nuclear weapons discourse**

For decades the discourse on nuclear weapons has been dominated by traditional national security considerations of possessor states. In an age of globalization and in light of their uncontrollable destructive capability, it is overdue to move beyond such a narrow perspective. Their indiscriminate nature and the worldwide consequences of any nuclear weapons use would have drastic consequences for all of us.

Nuclear weapons bear an unacceptable risk to humanity and to all life on Earth. Past experience from the use and testing of nuclear weapons has amply demonstrated the enormous harm caused by these weapons. New research on the global consequences of nuclear weapons has further increased our understanding. Any nuclear weapons use would cause severe humanitarian emergencies and have global consequences for the environment, global health, the climate, the social order, human development and the economy. These aspects should be at the core of the discourse on nuclear weapons and the clear focus of global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts.

The humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons have increasingly become recognized as such a fundamental and global concern. The 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) expressed *“deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons”*. In April 2012, 80 NPT State Parties delivered an unprecedented joint statement on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons underscoring inter alia that, *“(...) as an element that underpins the NPT, it is essential that the humanitarian consequences inform our work and actions (...)”*. Moreover, in 2011 the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement emphasized the *“incalculable human suffering resulting from any use of nuclear weapons”* and stressed that *“it is difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law”*.

An important conference took place in Norway earlier this year. Its messages were clear: A nuclear weapon detonation today

- would cause destruction and human suffering on a scale far exceeding the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki;
- cause a humanitarian emergency beyond the capabilities of any State or international body to provide adequate assistance;
- would not be constrained by national borders but affect communities regionally as well as globally.

Such an existential threat to all humankind is an issue that concerns the entire international community and cannot be handled as primarily a national security matter by a few states. I therefore welcome the follow-up conference that is planned in Mexico next year and would like particularly highlight the role of civil society in raising awareness and to focus the discourse on the real consequences of nuclear weapons use.

### **III) Nuclear weapons are not a remote danger; urgency to act**

The occurrence of such global humanitarian consequences is not a remote and unrealistic scenario at present. In many ways, the situation today is not less dangerous as at the time of the Cold War. Already 9 states are in possession of nuclear weapons but overcoming the technological challenges to build these weapons is no longer limited to a few states. More and more states – and potentially non-state actors – will be in a position to *de facto* reach or cross the line of nuclear weapons capability. The decision to do this will increasingly become a political rather than technological one.

The consequences of this trend are grave. As the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation increases, so does the risk of their use by someone somewhere. Yet, a focus on nonproliferation alone – as important as it is – is ultimately doomed to fail. With the technological threshold getting lower and the interest in nuclear technology getting higher, the only long term approach is to build credible political and legal barriers against nuclear weapons as such and to reduce and eliminate the perceived political and security motivations for the possession of these weapons.

Regrettably, the deterrence value of these weapons as “ultimate guarantors of security” is still claimed by some. Trusting that nuclear deterrence can provide stability and security in the long run is, however, a high risk approach to both national and global security. The notion that governments are rational enough to handle nuclear deterrence and that nuclear deterrence works, because it makes governments act

rationality, is a dangerous circular argument. Nuclear deterrence is just as fallible as any other human concept. Relying on the credibility of mutually assured destruction as the foundation of international relations and stability is neither responsible nor sustainable. With the danger of non-state actors increasingly entering the equation, nuclear deterrence becomes even more obsolete.

In addition, attributing nuclear weapons with such "ultimate security" qualities and the lure of power and technological sophistication is in itself a key driver for their proliferation. This is evidenced by the dangerous signs of a nuclear arms race in Asia and the mounting nuclear proliferation risks in the Middle East. The conclusion is evident that nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation efforts can only be achieved together.

#### **IV) Drawing the right conclusions: urgent and focussed multilateral efforts**

Progress towards the global aspiration of a world without nuclear weapons has so far been limited at best. The reasons for this are manifold but key among them are strong political differences of some stakeholders and a lack of convergence with respect to priorities and the approach that should be followed.

As this situation is naturally of great concern for the "silent majority" of States that is committed to multilateralism, some conclusions need to be drawn. Much greater efforts across regional groups are necessary to move beyond the old divisions and entrenched positions that have made substantive progress difficult. There needs to be a clear focus on one shared goal: a world without nuclear weapons.

It is therefore encouraging that the General Assembly has taken up this issue with a renewed sense of responsibility. This is evidenced *inter alia* by the decision to convene today's High-Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament and by the establishment of an Open-ended Working Group in Geneva to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations pursuant to Resolution 67/56. The Working Group successfully concluded its work only last month. It provided an important opportunity for serious discussions on the elements that would be required for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons.

Such initiatives emphasize the responsibility of the General Assembly to work towards the "elimination from national armaments of atomic

weapons", as already envisaged in its very first resolution I/1 of January 1946. They also underscore the shared motivation by the overwhelming majority of states to achieve real progress.

In 2008, the Secretary-General formulated his five-point proposal on how a world without nuclear weapons can be attained. This year, he said that "there are no right hands for the wrong weapons." He is entirely right. The peoples of the world have the right to live without this menace. It is time to move beyond this deadly legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Nuclear weapons should be stigmatized, banned and eliminated before they abolish us. How we deal with nuclear weapons is therefore a litmus-test for the international community. It will clarify whether we are capable to resolve a fundamental challenge to our very existence through international cooperation.

Thank You!