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General Debate

Statement by

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Austria

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Mr. Chairman,

At the outset, I would like to join others in congratulating you on your assumption of the chair and assure you of the full support of my delegation. Austria aligns herself with the statement delivered by the European Union earlier during this debate.

The 1st Committee of the UN General Assembly is always an opportunity to look back at the past year as well as forward and to assess where the international community finds itself in this most vital area of international relations. This past year has brought us some encouraging developments. Other developments and trends, however, are deeply disconcerting and raise serious worries about the future of the rule of law based international security architecture.

High up among the positive developments ranks the Arms Trade Treaty. Austria was proud to be among the 50 first states to ratify the ATT. With its imminent entry into force and through its effective international standards to regulate the international arms trade, we expect the treaty to make an important contribution to human security, human rights and development. Its universalization and effective implementation will be crucial to translate the obligations of this robust and strong instrument into concrete measures on the ground. We thank Mexico for a successful first preparatory meeting and look forward to the next meeting in Germany in November. Austria has offered to host the future permanent ATT Secretariat in Vienna, a global hub for security and development issues, which we believe would offer a great spectrum of expertise and valuable conditions for a Secretariat to carry out its duties in a transparent, effective and efficient way.

The decisive and effective cooperation of the international community to remove and destroy Syria’s declared stockpile of chemical weapons was another key positive result of last year. We commend the work of the UN and the OPCW. In fact it was an example how the international community should respond to such grave breaches of international law and international humanitarian law. At the same time, we are gravely concerned about new allegations of the use of chlorine gas. Such horrific acts fit into the overall degradation or loss of respect for basic IHL principles and the protection of civilians in armed conflict that is apparent in Syria.

We continue to be hopeful that the negotiations between the EU3+3 with Iran, which are to resume this week in Vienna, can lead to a successful solution of the Iranian nuclear issue. There has been progress since the new diplomatic opening a year ago, but much work remains to be done to resolve this issue in a manner that allays all concerns of the international community about the nature of Iran’s nuclear program.

While we hope that these negotiations will reinforce the NPT’s credibility in the non-proliferations pillar, we are deeply concerned about the overall situation of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

The NPT’s lack of universality weakens the treaty's credibility and effectiveness to ensure non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and to serve as a framework to achieve nuclear disarmament. DPRK’s nuclear weapons and missiles programs continue to be of grave concern. We observe significant nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles developments on the Indian Subcontinent. The difficulties to follow through on the 2010 decision to convene a conference on the WMD-free Zone in the Middle East, which Austria fully supports, are also evidence of this.

Austria has always been a staunch supporter of the NPT and the most stringent non-proliferation rules. However, the focus on proliferation is not sufficient. As we look towards the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the limited progress on the disarmament actions of 2010 action plan is a source of growing concern and disappointment. We acknowledge some
proposals have been made and some steps taken by individual nuclear weapons states, such as reductions and limited modifications in doctrines. However, the clear change of direction away from reliance on nuclear weapons that we and others hoped would be initiated after 2010 is not at all apparent. In fact, developments such as the crisis in Ukraine, on which the EU has expressed our position, are used by some to even question the feasibility of nuclear disarmament.

We also maintain that we fail to see how large scale investments, modernization and replacements programs of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons infrastructure and consequently the obvious intention to rely on these weapons for generations to come, could be interpreted as being compatible with the obligations and commitments under Article 6 and the 2010 action plan. Such continued reliance on nuclear weapons is possibly the greatest driving force for the proliferation of these weapons. This behavior may not proliferate the weapons and the technology themselves, but it certainly proliferates the symbolism and status associated with nuclear weapons. 44 years after the entry into force of the NPT and 19 years after its indefinite extension, we see this as a fundamental and increasing threat to the credibility of the NPT. We urge all member states, in particular the nuclear weapon states, to redouble their efforts to increase the credibility, direction and focus of nuclear disarmament efforts.

In this context, Austria would like to call on all the remaining Annex 2 States to take decisive action towards the ratification of the CTBT in advance of the 2015 NPT Review Conference. Its continued lack of entry into force also undermines the credibility and fabric of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

Mr. Chairman,

As all additional areas of cooperation to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to ensure compliance with such obligations are important and consistent with the NPT, so are all efforts to promote and facilitate nuclear disarmament and the achievement of a world without nuclear weapons.

Austria considers the growing momentum and focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons as embedded in the NPT preamble and recognized by the 2010 Final Document to be a very important development. The facts based discussions at the two international conferences in Norway in 2013 and Mexico in 2014 made a compelling case that the broad range of humanitarian consequences are even greater than we previously understood. Even a so-called “limited nuclear exchange” using a small fraction of today’s nuclear arsenals could result in an immediate humanitarian emergency of enormous scale. The images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would pale in comparison. No national or international capacity exists to deal with such consequences in any adequate manner. There would not and could not be a winner in such a scenario. All humanity would loose; in the words of Ronald Reagan: “a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought”.

New information has also become available about risks associated with nuclear weapons. These risks are there, they are more serious than previously known and can never be eliminated completely. Humankind has been very lucky on several occasions in the past; reason should demand urgent action to move beyond nuclear weapons.

For these reasons and to continue and deepen this important discourse, Austria will host the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons on 8 and 9 December 2014. Austria seeks to strengthen the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime and generate momentum for concrete progress on nuclear disarmament. As the credibility and effectiveness of our treaty based regimes is increasingly challenged, we believe the international community should unite around the humanitarian imperative that underpins all of our work. We are extremely grateful for the widespread interest and
expressions of support for this initiative not the least in the many statements delivered in the past few days.

Representation by all states is welcome and all have been invited. The Conference will also be open to relevant international organizations, academics and civil society. We are encouraging open, substantive and constructive discussions. We look forward to the active participation of all stakeholders who want to see progress in our shared objective of nuclear disarmament and a world without nuclear weapons.

Mr. Chairman,

Conventional weapons continue to cause casualties and human suffering at the largest scale. Efforts to reduce and prevent armed violence and human suffering caused by conventional weapons must remain a priority for the international community. The full and effective participation of women and men is key for making any such efforts a success.

Humanitarian disarmament instruments such as the Mine Ban Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions play a crucial role in strengthening the international legal framework for the protection of civilians. It is the indiscriminate effects and unacceptable humanitarian consequences of these weapons that have led to their total ban. It is horrifying to witness that these indiscriminate weapons continue to cost human life and cause human tragedy. This underscores the need for the universalization of these instruments. At the Third Review Conference of the Mine Ban Convention in Maputo in June 2014, States Parties have renewed their commitment to fully implement all Treaty obligations and have set themselves clear targets for completing the time-bound obligations. Encouraged by the success of this meeting, we look forward to the First Review Conference of the Convention on Cluster Munitions in Dubrovnik in 2015, which will be an important milestone in further strengthening the norms of the CCM to the inside and the outside.

We reiterate that the obligation to protect civilians from unnecessary harm applies to all States. The international community needs to remain alert and responsive to new challenges arising. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is increasingly recognised as a key concern for the international community, witnessing high numbers of civilians casualties and devastating effects of these weapons to infrastructure, socio-economic development as well as forced displacement. The international community should step up its efforts and explore ways on how to provide adequate protection to civilians from the severe harm of these weapons. Austria in partnership with the International Network for Explosive Weapons will host a side event on this issue on 22 October.

The development of lethal autonomous weapon systems touches upon fundamental questions of ethics that have to be confronted. The potential of such weapon systems for lowering the threshold to resort to force, for proliferation to irresponsible users, and for the instigation for new arms race, pose a risk for international peace and stability. Strong doubts remain about the possibility of LAWS's compliance with international law. We therefore welcome the discussions that have been launched in the framework of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and call for a continued debate in the relevant UN fora in an inclusive way, with the participation of experts and civil society more broadly.

We will further elaborate on these and other issues during the thematic debates.

I thank you.