

Diplomatic conference to negotiate a new legal instrument for the prohibition of nuclear weapons leading to their total elimination

Organisational Meeting

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STATEMENT BY IRELAND

Mr Chairman

Ireland is very pleased to attend this Organisational Meeting. I would like to begin by thanking UNODA for all of the preparatory work which has made today's meeting possible. My delegation warmly welcomes the nomination by Costa Rica of Ambassador Elayne-Whyte Gomez and we are very pleased to endorse her as President-Designate of this diplomatic conference. We look forward to the formal election of the President and the formal adoption of the conference documents on 27 March. We especially welcome the role for civil society in these negotiations, as promised in the Resolution to establish this conference. We would not have reached this point without the support and advocacy of our civil society partners and we welcome their full and active engagement with us. We note the nominations for the members of the Bureau and that this is now a matter for the President-Designate.

In October last year, here in this very room/building, at First Committee, my Delegation, together with our partners - Austria, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa - brought forward a UN Resolution which called for the establishment of this diplomatic conference with a UN mandate to negotiate a new legal instrument for the prohibition of nuclear weapons, leading to their total elimination. This resolution was founded on the findings and final report of the Open Ended Working Group which met in Geneva last year and which was so ably chaired by Ambassador Thani Thongpakdi of Thailand. That OEWG came about as a result of a Resolution presented by Ireland, Austria, Mexico and South Africa at First Committee in 2015. And that Resolution built upon the work of the three Humanitarian Consequences Conferences, held in Oslo, Nayarit and most recently Vienna, which culminated in the Humanitarian Pledge. The options for closing the legal gap referenced in the Pledge had been set out in a number of Working Papers developed as a constructive contribution to the

NPT review process by the New Agenda Coalition, a grouping established in 1998, of which Ireland is proud to be a founder member and the current NAC Coordinator.

My delegation can trace our engagement on this issue back for almost twenty years. Indeed, nuclear disarmament has been a priority for the government of Ireland, our parliament and our people from the outset of our membership of this United Nations. Our then Foreign Minister, Frank Aiken, addressed the UN many times from 1957 on the urgent need for nuclear disarmament and as a result of his efforts, Ireland was the first state invited to sign the NPT. For my delegation, there is an unbroken line from Frank Aiken's signature to our work here today. Our commitment to the NPT remains unwavering. We want to see not just universalisation but also implementation, including full implementation of Article VI of the Treaty. This is the driving force behind our determination, to see this diplomatic conference convened and to ensure effective negotiations on nuclear disarmament are taken forward. This historic commitment goes to the very heart of our belief in a rules-based international world order and the important, and indeed essential, leadership role for small states within that order. Nuclear disarmament, as we have been told, may be a challenge for large states with nuclear weapons, but it is equally important and, under the NPT, just as much a responsibility for small states with no nuclear weapons. The NPT is regularly described as the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime. But what does that mean, to be a cornerstone? It is the stone on which the whole edifice depends. Those of us who are States Parties to the NPT must take our responsibilities seriously and must lead by example. That is, I hope, what we are all doing here today. This is a step and many more will be required but it is a step.

The masonry metaphors, of foundation, cornerstones and pillars, while effective, should not cause a false interpretation of the NPT as something set in stone or frozen in time. Like all treaties, it is a living document and it never claimed to be the last word, envisaging in Article VI further effective measures and a complementary treaty. There is a dynamic tension at the heart of the treaty, a grand bargain which does not preserve forever any right to nuclear weapons but rather acknowledges the reality of their existence while the process of disarmament is taken forward. "Taking forward" are the operative words here, for there has been little perceptible progress on the multilateral nuclear disarmament pillar under the NPT and today marks the beginning of the first multilateral nuclear weapons negotiations since the CTBT over twenty years ago, a treaty which regrettably has still not entered into force,

despite its ever increasing importance. We cannot ignore the wider security situation, nor should we. There has been a worrying decrease in the taboo around threat of use; there are persistent illegal nuclear tests; there is vast investment in so-called modernisation with talk of more strategic, more targeted, more usable nuclear weapons. The very idea that any nuclear weapon could ever be used again and in some sort of controlled way is one of the most dangerous to have emerged in the current discourse. Nuclear weapons are the most powerful and most indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction ever invented. Knowing what we know now about their catastrophic consequences and the impossibility of any adequate humanitarian response, we must do everything to ensure that they are never used again.

Our work here at the UN on the sustainable development goals and on the great challenge of migration has reinforced again that we are many countries but one small, shared planet. We must never forget the reason that we are here, because humanity had had enough of war. Nuclear weapons respect no borders and their effects can be controlled by no one. To quote the old proverb, he who rides a tiger will find it hard to descend for fear of being eaten. But descend he must. We are here to help those who still rely on these toxic weapons to view them as we and the majority do, as inhumane, indiscriminate and beyond any possible legal use. Change only comes about when the status quo becomes less comfortable, when the discomfort of doing something new becomes less than keeping things the same. Last year, over 100 States decided that it was time for change. My delegation stands ready to support the Chair, the Bureau and the Secretariat. As we take on the responsibility of making change happen, we hope that many more states will join in this endeavour. We welcome the broad and brave participation from states here today, including those less developed states and smaller states whose voices, including many female voices, were so powerful and so necessary at the OEWG in Geneva. We know that many others will be watching today's meeting, some who may have already made up their minds, and we would appeal to them to remain open to the possibility of change, to see that our work here is in the interest of all, all of our humanity, all of our hopes, all of our security, and to come and join us, on 27 March, on 15 June, here at the United Nations, to build a better future, on the right side of history.

Thank you,

ENDS

