



IRELAND

Statement by

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and other international organisations at Geneva**

at the

**United Nations Conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to
prohibit nuclear weapons, leading toward their total elimination**

High Level Segment

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Madam President,

At the outset, allow me to congratulate you warmly on your role as President of this historic UN Conference and to extend those congratulations to the members of your Bureau and the Secretariat. My delegation assures you that we are ready to work with you, and your team, to ensure a productive, effective and successful outcome. 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. **In the interests of brevity and knowing that many delegates will wish to speak today, I will limit my remarks and we will lodge a longer text for the record.**

Madam President,

The word “historic” is over-used these days but I believe that this is one of those moments in time when it is truly deserved and warranted. This is a moment when the past demands something of the present. We are here to answer that imperative for action. Almost 60 years since the first UN Resolution on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, tabled by my country, Ireland, and following a long and noble path of advocacy, testimony and leadership by civil society, survivors, experts, academics and a clear majority of states, we have reached the moment when we begin to negotiate, here at the UN, a prohibition treaty on the only remaining weapons of mass destruction not yet subject to a ban. We do so in the knowledge that this is the first such multilateral negotiation to address nuclear weapons in over twenty years. We do so in the context of no perceptible progress on the implementation of Article VI of the NPT, a treaty which was indefinitely extended in 1995 and will soon be fifty years old. And we

do so against a backdrop when the taboo on threat of use and indeed the risk of an actual detonation of a nuclear weapon, either accidentally or on purpose, as an act of war or of terror, through human or cyber threat, is worryingly much higher than it has been in a very long time.

This then is a pivotal point in our international relations, a time to take stock and honour the testimony of the past, to decide what sort of present we wish to live in and what sort of legacy we wish to leave for future generations. We are not just writing a new and complementary treaty here, we are taking the opportunity to write a new history and in so doing to create a new, more stable, more secure and more equal future for all. We could not have reached this historic moment without a great deal of effort by a wide range of committed and, dare I say visionary, leaders and advocates. For vision and leadership is what has been required to reach this point of action, often in the face of great adversity, negativity and opposition. It is important to stress that this vision has been a positive and a proactive one and is steeped in the documented evidence of the humanitarian consequences of these weapons. Speaking for my delegation, we do not develop our policies out of frustration, we act on the evidence, on our clear obligations and commitments under international law and our moral and ethical responsibilities as citizens in a global world order.

(In October last year, here in this very 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 towards 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 our NPT signature to our work here today and 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 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, where all voices can be heard. In these

challenging times, what is certain is that we must remain true to the principles which serve us best, those which led to the creation of the UN itself and those which continue to serve as its guiding force today, principles of peace-making, of mutual respect, of human rights and of shared responsibility. The equilibrium of world order cannot be held in place and is not currently held in place by either threat or fear, in fact quite the reverse and a permanent peace can only ever be attained through respect for the rule of law, based on justice. To quote our former FM Frank Aitken, speaking at the UN in 1958, "The achievement of peace based on law requires positive sacrifices, which may not be forthcoming but which it is our duty to seek, each according to our ability and influence." Nuclear disarmament may, as we have been told, 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, a responsibility on which my delegation is acting in our engagement with these negotiations.

(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. 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 NPT, 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.)

As we begin our important work here, we cannot ignore the wider security situation. 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 and increased reliance on these weapons in security doctrines. 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 reject the premise that they can ever be used again under any circumstances. All of our shared work on the sustainable development goals and on the great challenge of migration, as well as climate change, has reinforced again that we are many countries but one small, shared planet. Nuclear weapons respect no borders and their effects can be controlled by nobody. Ireland is pleased to be hosting an event here at the UN on Tuesday in conjunction with “The Future of Life Institute” to hear from leading scientists on the risks associated with these weapons and the threat that they pose us all.

Madam President,

You have invited us to speak about our objectives for our work. Our starting point should be the UN Resolution, which is our mandate for this diplomatic conference, namely “to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination”. If we unpack this text, then we have some clear parameters with which to define our work. Firstly, what we are negotiating here is a legal instrument, it is more than a political declaration and it will need to be given legal effect in our own national systems. As a new legal instrument, it does not exist in a vacuum and will need to take account of and indicate how it will complement and support the existing body of law and other instruments. The core objective is the prohibition of the weapons, the first time these weapons of mass destruction will be clearly and unambiguously prohibited, addressing the current legal gap. We need to continue to reiterate that these weapons are inhumane, indiscriminate and beyond any possible legal use. Our focus is on the weapon and not on the actor. Our mandate also refers to “leading towards their total elimination”, so the treaty will need to indicate its place in this pathway, in which it is a step, with many others required. From these starting points, grounded in the resolution, we can develop the treaty provisions and necessary supports and I think that the agenda, timetable and programme of work you have developed provides us with the opportunity to do so.

We know that 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. As we take on the responsibility of making this 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. We would encourage them, once again, to join us in this common endeavour, if not now, then in June and July, as we work together to build mutual understanding and to create a better future, on the right side of history.
