

Special Report by the Government Representative:

George-Wilhelm Gallhofer

Minister, Head of Unit for Nuclear Weapons, IAEA, CTBTO and NPT

Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs

Austria

It is a great pleasure and honour to be here and speak to you today in this singular place. Here, history is very much alive. Here, nuclear weapons are not theoretical. They are real. They are personal. They have touched peoples' lives. The Hibakushas' powerful testimony shows what "security" is really about – the security of every individual. Not of countries in abstraction.

For nearly three quarters of a century now, the Hibakusha have kept focus on the individual tragedies of nuclear explosions, galvanising people to join nuclear abolition movements around the world. During the Cold War, these movements successfully pushed nuclear weapons states to admit that they should not retain these weapons forever. Indeed, the Non-Proliferation Treaty is built on the understanding that no additional countries may acquire nuclear weapons and that those that have them must eliminate them.

As we meet here, in this place, we cannot help but be compelled to redouble our fight for nuclear disarmament. We know we are on the right side of history.

That said, we are also living in arguably the most challenging time for disarmament in decades. Hard fought-for diplomatic achievements to reduce the unacceptable risks of nuclear weapons are rapidly unravelling. The INF treaty just ended, allowing for the re-stationing of land-based intermediate-range missiles for the first time in over 30 years, endangering Europe and the world and reducing the reaction time for nuclear attacks to mere minutes. The New START treaty is in danger of lapsing without concrete progress to secure its extension and a follow-up agreement. Even more recent diplomatic break-throughs such as the JCPOA are under threat.

Until recently, nuclear disarmament was steadily progressing. There had been large stockpile reductions, in particular by the two countries with the largest arsenals. But this progress has come to a standstill; and worse, a new nuclear arms race has begun. Described as modernisations, nuclear arsenals are being upgraded and modernised to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars with the aim of keeping them in service for decades to come. New types of nuclear weapons are being developed to make them "more useable", such as so-called small tactical nuclear weapons. Some of these so-called small or low-yield nuclear weapons are actually of a similar size to those dropped in 1945.

Clearly, some have drawn the wrong lessons from the unspeakable tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear weapon possessing states and their allies still believe that their security depends on nuclear deterrence - that a professed readiness to wipe out populations, if not civilisation itself, actually prevents war. And yet, as we know, the concept of deterrence simply does not stand up to scrutiny. There have been direct military confrontations between nuclear processor states, for example India and Pakistan.

The argument that we need nuclear weapons to keep us safe also ignores the vast technological developments of late. For example, the real danger of cyber attacks has made nuclear deterrence unreliable, even for those who believe in the concept. Hybrid threats and the weaponisation of disinformation have increased the risk of escalation and miscalculation.

In the wise words of Mikhail Gorbachev "It is becoming clearer that nuclear weapons are no longer a means of achieving security; in fact, with every passing year they make our security more precarious." And indeed in these dangerous times, the famous Doomsday Clock has now returned to a time not seen since the 1980s.

And yet, while these dangerous developments dominate the headlines, a revolution of sorts is also taking place. The majority of countries in the world have declared that they are unwilling to ignore the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Unsatisfied with the repeatedly unfulfilled promises of disarmament in an indefinite future, a resounding 122 countries – nearly 2/3 of UN member states – adopted The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons on 7 July 2017.

Many of you personally contributed to this long sought-for achievement. Let me say a few words about Austria's role in the process. Austria takes a humanitarian approach in our foreign policy and that has guided us in all areas of disarmament. For example, clarifying international humanitarian law on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas; insisting on human control in relation to lethal autonomous weapons; and reframing the nuclear disarmament discourse around humanitarian consequences.

In fact, Austria's constitution explicitly prohibits nuclear weapons, as well as nuclear energy. This was achieved after Austrian civil society mobilised against the construction of a nuclear powerplant, culminating in a consensus among all political parties against nuclear energy and nuclear weapons.

Similarly, civil society mobilisation at the international level proved invaluable to creating a unique international coalition against nuclear weapons. Austria also heeded their call, in particular the powerful testimonies of the Hibakusha and the evidence gathered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Working in close cooperation with these actors, the broader International Campaign against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and a couple of like-minded countries, we decided to together pursue a reframing of the nuclear weapons discourse around their unacceptable humanitarian consequences.

We held three humanitarian conferences -- in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna – to gather and draw together existing and new insight into the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons, including through Hibakusha testimony. Drawing on their first-hand experience from the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, the ICRC outlined that still today, no capacity exists to provide help in humanitarian emergencies caused by nuclear weapons explosions. The ICRC also made it clear that it would be difficult to envision a scenario where the use of nuclear weapons might be compatible with international humanitarian law, given their devastating and indiscriminate impact.

We learned that the consequences of nuclear explosions are much more grave and complex than previously understood or acknowledged. For example, even a limited exchange of nuclear weapons can lead to nuclear winter. Presenters also explained the risks inherent in nuclear weapons systems, which can be mitigated but not eliminated. For example, control and command systems are prone to errors, as shown by many historical examples. As statisticians pointed out, this means that the longer nuclear weapon systems remain in existence, the higher the likelihood of an accident.

Bolstered by this wide range of findings, Austria launched the “Humanitarian Pledge on Nuclear Weapons”, in which we committed to work with others to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. A total of 127 countries endorsed the pledge, demonstrating just how pressing this concern is to the overwhelming majority of the world.

The resulting Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons prohibits the one class of weapons of mass destruction still without prohibition. Taking the humanitarian consequences and inherent risks of nuclear weapons as a starting point, it draws the line that nuclear weapons are simply too dangerous and consequently should be prohibited, just like other weapons of mass destruction. It is, as Hiroshima's own Setsuko Thurlow put it, “the beginning of the end of nuclear weapons.”

Of course, we are without illusion that the Treaty will immediately reduce risks or nuclear weapon stocks. It is an important and necessary step, and we will need further instruments to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. But the Treaty clearly delegitimizes nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, and aims to make it harder for states to rely on nuclear weapons in defence doctrines and strategies.

It is also a signifier that having a say on nuclear weapons is not exclusive to states who possess them. The security of every person is equally important and each of our countries has the right to participate in the nuclear disarmament discourse. The Treaty has galvanised and energised a majority of states to make their voices heard and not accept empty promises of disarmament in a distant utopic future.

So where does the Treaty stand today?

The Treaty needs 50 ratifications to enter into force. I'm happy to say that it is well on its way! 70 countries have already signed, and 23 – including Austria – have already ratified.

This may appear to some to be a slow process, but relative to the speed of multilateral treaties and ratification processes, to be at nearly half the required ratifications after only two years is actually extremely fast. We look forward to further countries signing and ratifying at the high-level ceremony at the United Nations General Assembly next month.

We should not forget that some of the most powerful countries in the world are working against this Treaty. In the face of this, every additional signature and ratification is a clear assertion that the security of their citizens is equally important to that of countries possessing nuclear weapons. Already 70 countries have proved their unwillingness to compromise on their moral and legal understanding of the threat of nuclear weapons. They have decided that their safety is not improved by nuclear weapons but worsened. Indeed, the new arms race, the ongoing erosion of international agreements, and the reduction of channels to solve bilateral conflicts has elevated the risks from nuclear weapons to higher levels than ever before. This must be a call to action.

And this is where we need you, civil society, movements, Hibakusha. The Hibakushas' untiring resolve and commitment has shown the horrors of nuclear weapons' indiscriminate destruction. But in much of the world awareness has faded since the end of the Cold War. We need to ensure that the

catastrophic humanitarian consequences are understood the world over. The information is already at hand, it just needs to be disseminated faster.

And while these are challenging times, they are also inspiring times. With social media and rapid information dissemination, worthy causes get taken up faster and wider. We see how powerful grassroots movements can be, for example the current climate change activism. Citizens – and especially youth – are increasingly unwilling to back down in the face of existential threats. We need to ensure that they take up this cause.

So let us engage them and educate them about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences, and inherent risks, of nuclear weapons. The scientific arguments are there and the personal testimonies of the Hibakusha provide profound insight into the individual tragedies. Let us get the TPNW into force and continue to work towards eliminating these weapons to extinguish the Hiroshima Memorial Flame once and for all.

Thank you.