

**Statement by H.E. Alexander Schallenberg
Federal Minister for European and International Affairs
Republic of Austria
Conference on Disarmament, February 2021**

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The global Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of our societies and the fragility of humankind.

And this pandemic is far from over. It overshadows other crises and conflicts around the world.

The doomsday clock by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists recently reminded us that the existential threats of nuclear weapons have intensified in recent years.

The clock now stands at 100 seconds to midnight. We have no time to lose!

The danger posed by these hideous weapons has not diminished since the end of the Cold War. On the contrary: the risks are actually increasing as arsenals are being modernized and new delivery systems are being developed. A new nuclear arms race is actually unfolding in front of our eyes.

We cannot stand idly by and do nothing. We must eliminate nuclear weapons, before they eliminate us!

The entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a historic milestone for disarmament and a big step forward towards a world, free of nuclear weapons. Austria is looking forward to the First Meeting of States Parties in Vienna within a year.

But we also need to strengthen other cornerstones of the disarmament architecture:

- by ensuring that States fulfil their obligations under the Non-proliferation Treaty,
- by encouraging more ratifications of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and
- by broadening the scope of New START.

We welcome its extension for five years by the United States and Russia as an important signal. Let us use the time to make additional steps with Austria standing ready to host further strategic talks.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our duty to our citizens is not only to deal with the crises of today. We have to prepare for the challenges of tomorrow and to ensure a peaceful future for many generations to come.

Rapid technological advances raise fundamental legal, moral and security questions. No more so than lethal autonomous weapons systems.

This is not science fiction. It is fast becoming a reality – a reality that the Secretary-General of the UN has rightly called both “politically unacceptable and morally repugnant”.

We cannot allow an algorithm to decide who lives and who dies. We must ensure that weapons systems without meaningful human control are banned under international law. With this aim in mind, Austria will host an international conference on this issue this autumn. I invite all of you to join us in Vienna.

Another long-standing priority for Austria is the protection of civilians in urban warfare. I welcome the resumption of negotiations on a political declaration on explosive weapons in populated areas.

We have seen prosperous cities razed down to the ground, hospitals destroyed and schools reduced to rubble. The tragedies on the battlefields of Syria, Yemen and Libya painfully demonstrate the need to protect civilians, now more than ever. Let’s take a stand together and show that respecting international humanitarian law is not a choice but a duty.

Mr. President,

I deeply regret that disputes over who can participate as observer at the Conference on Disarmament have overshadowed the beginning of this session. This goes against the very spirit of multilateralism. Everyone should have a seat at the table and the right to have their voices heard.

And I strongly deplore that we are still facing a deadlock that prevents us from having effective negotiations within this conference. It has been 25 years since the last meaningful outcome – the CTBT. Let’s not make it 26!

Ladies and gentlemen,

We will not achieve progress in the blink of an eye. We must show both courageous leadership and persistence. But given the existential threat to humanity, it is our humanitarian and moral imperative.

Thank you for your attention!