STATEMENT BY
MR ALVIN BOTES
DEPUTY MINISTER OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND COOPERATION
OF SOUTH AFRICA
TO THE FIRST MEETING OF STATES PARTIES TO THE TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Thank you, Mr President, for the opportunity to address this august gathering. It has indeed been a long journey and now we are finally here, working on the implementation of this vital Treaty.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

South Africa has been at the forefront of nuclear disarmament efforts for decades. The democratic transformation process in my
country fundamentally altered the role of apartheid South Africa from being a threat to international peace and security, to a democratic State which is a principled and responsible actor in terms of the maintenance international peace and security.

This approach also forms the basis of our engagement in disarmament diplomacy. Since its inauguration in May 1994, the democratic Government South African committed itself to a policy of disarmament and non-proliferation which covers all weapons of mass destruction. This policy forms an integral part of South Africa’s commitment to democracy, human rights, sustainable development, social justice and environmental protection, which is reflected in our humanitarian approach, inter alia, to disarmament.

South Africa’s commitment to disarmament is based on our belief that international peace and security cannot be divorced from development.

Global security cannot be achieved when enormous financial and other resources are still being diverted towards the acquisition of more and more destructive capabilities, while more and more people around the world continue to suffer from hunger and deprivation. Our ultimate goal is a world free of nuclear weapons
and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is an important addition to the disarmament and non-proliferation architecture, that takes us closer to that goal.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Twenty-four years ago in 1998, President Mandela in his last address to the United Nations General Assembly pertinently noted that, “We must ask the question, which might sound naive to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction – why do they need them anyway!”

South Africa’s own experience has shown that neither the possession, nor the pursuit of nuclear weapons can enhance international peace and security. The continued retention of nuclear weapons on the basis of the perceived security interests of some States comes at the expense of the rest of humanity.

While most of the nuclear weapon Possessing States justify their continuing possession of these weapons on the grounds that they purportedly guarantee their security, it must be reiterated that we, as non-nuclear-weapon States have the conviction that their mere
existence constitutes a threat to our national security and to humanity as a whole.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we gather here for this First Meeting of States Parties, we have the opportunity to send a strong and lasting signal of a progressive march forward in humanity’s endeavour to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This should find expression in a political declaration that addresses all nuclear weapon-possessing States and provides a united response against this existential threat to humanity.

South Africa has always emphasised the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, as well as the humanitarian imperatives that underpin our search for a world without the threat posed by the possession, use and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

These considerations are today a fundamental and global concern that should be at the core of our deliberations, actions and decisions as we work on the implementation of the TPNW.
We must recognize that this Treaty is the democratic wish of the overwhelming majority of UN Member States and the people of the world. No longer should the world’s people’s be held hostage to the unspeakable terror of these weapons.

We appreciate Austria hosting the virtual preparatory process and this first meeting of states parties here in Vienna. In keeping with the inclusivity of the Treaty and its universalisation, we look forward to future meetings of the TPNW being held at the United Nations in New York, where there is the broadest representation of UN member states, especially developing states, who were instrumental in the adoption of the Treaty.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While we recognize the sovereign right of each State to decide whether or not it would ratify treaties that seek to establish higher international norms, we regret any attempts to undermine this new Treaty and in particular what it endeavours to achieve.

I have to emphasise that the TPNW complements other international instruments by contributing to fulfilling the nuclear disarmament obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation
Treaty (NPT), the objectives of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) as well as the various nuclear weapon free zone treaties, such as the Pelindaba Treaty that already banned nuclear weapons in Africa.

TPNW States Parties’ focus on the implementation of Article 6 of the NPT gives impetus to nuclear disarmament. This complementarity is essential in the face of previous nuclear disarmament obligations and commitments, that remain unfulfilled, and which puts at risk the grand bargain and indefinite extension of the NPT.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Most of the significant events related to nuclear weapons that have taken place over the last few years, both globally and regionally, highlight that nuclear deterrence does not preserve peace.

South Africa calls on policymakers in States under the extended nuclear security guarantee to shift their policy towards nuclear weapon elimination and free themselves from this notion of nuclear deterrence.
All of us here today are driven by a sense of responsibility and urgency and have made up our minds. We are convinced that the current security environment allows no room for procrastination. Humanity cannot afford to wait for the "right time" before doing away with nuclear weapons.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying a nuclear weapon free world is possible.

States gathered here have the opportunity to act together on the implementation of this Treaty thus providing the urgency and determination to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end.

We have a shared responsibility to protect future generations. Let us work together and let’s display our courage, in a sustained commitment and concerted effort to rid this planet of these horrific weapons.

I thank you.