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NPT Prep Com 2017 - Cluster 1 – Statement by Sweden on behalf of the de-alerting group

Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to take the floor on behalf of the de-alerting group - Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Switzerland and my own country Sweden - on the issue of reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems, also referred to as de-alerting.

Our group has consistently called on States with nuclear weapons to take practical steps to address the significant number of nuclear weapons that remain on high alert. We have made these calls in the NPT review processes as well as in the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly.

The contribution that lowering the operational status of nuclear weapons can make to nuclear disarmament has been widely recognized, including in the NPT. The Thirteen Practical Steps of 2000 called for concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems. The 2010 NPT Action Plan further recognised the legitimate interest of non-nuclear-weapon States in this issue.

These clear commitments remain to be met.

Experts estimate that Russia and the United States continuously maintain hundreds of missiles carrying roughly 1,800 warheads ready to be launched within minutes, multiplying the risks posed by these weapons. This is a cause for particular concern.

Mr. Chairman,

Recognition of the value of de-alerting has been growing steadily in recent years. A positive step was the widespread commitment to the pursuit of de-alerting measures expressed during the 2016 Open-ended Working Group on Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations in Geneva by many states - among them a group of states covered by extended nuclear deterrence. The latest UN General Assembly resolution on de-alerting reached its highest level of support yet – 175 states voted in favour of the resolution, with a significant number of states also co-sponsoring it. This sends a clear message to the NPT to continue our work to make sure that the commitments to take nuclear weapons from high alert are fulfilled.
Mr Chairman,

We know that de-alerting is possible. Some nuclear weapon states do not keep their nuclear weapons on high alert. Others have lowered the level of operational readiness of non-strategic nuclear weapons. These are positive and encouraging steps but they are clearly not enough.

Progress is urgently required for a number of reasons.

Lowering alert levels is a key element of nuclear risk reduction, as high alert levels significantly multiply the risks posed by nuclear weapons. Some of these risks include: inadvertent launches due to technical failure or operator error; possibility of misinterpretation of early warning data leading to intentional, but erroneous launches; failures of, and false reports by, early warning systems; use of nuclear weapons by unauthorised actors such as rogue military units, terrorists or cyber-attackers.

De-alerting is also a core element of diminishing the role and significance of nuclear weapons in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies. As such, de-alerting is not only a disarmament measure but also a significant contribution to non-proliferation, since continued emphasis on the importance of weapons on high alert could lead to false perceptions of nuclear weapons as desirable security instruments. Nuclear weapon states should consider de-alerting as a strategic step in deemphasizing the military role of nuclear weapons.

Mr Chairman,

The de-alerting group would like to see the following elements reflected in the report of this session of the Preparatory Committee.

The current NPT review cycle should recognise the link between high alert levels, associated risks and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences posed by nuclear weapons. In doing so it should recognise that, as an interim measure, de-alerting will diminish risks and hence increase human and international security.

The nuclear weapons states should urgently implement previously agreed commitments on de-alerting and take steps to rapidly reduce operational readiness – unilaterally, bilaterally or otherwise.

The nuclear weapon states should regularly report on their implementation of these commitments.
Mr. Chairman,

In conclusion: the de-alerting group believes that concrete steps towards nuclear disarmament are essential. They are also long overdue. Particularly in the current security climate, risk reduction measures - including de-alerting - should be prominent on our agenda. The de-alerting group looks forward to working over the course of this review cycle to ensure that progress in reducing operational readiness of nuclear weapons can be achieved.

Thank you.