STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA
AT THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE
HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS, VIENNA, AUSTRIA, 9
DECEMBER 2014

Chairperson,

South Africa wishes to congratulate the Government of Austria for having hosted this third International Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons to continue the work undertaken at the Oslo and Nayarit Conferences on this important subject. These Conferences and the discussions yesterday and today again confirmed that no State or international body is able to adequately respond to the immediate humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapons detonation or to effectively manage its medium and long-term impact.

South Africa believes that humanitarian considerations must underpin all discussions, actions and decisions on nuclear weapons. The increased understanding and awareness of the catastrophic impact of a nuclear weapon detonation and the continued risks for such a detonation, whether by accident, miscalculation or design, have contributed to ensuring that humanitarian considerations can no longer be ignored in a debate that has for too long been dominated by the national security interests and concerns of a small number of States, to the detriment of humanity as a whole.

We have noted that some States argue that security imperatives are equally important. We too believe that security imperatives must be factored into our deliberations, provided that they serve to guarantee increased security for all the world’s peoples – our collective security – which is precisely what the humanitarian dimension is all about. The evidence presented at this Conference demonstrates the significant risks associated with both the use and existence of nuclear weapons. This evidence, together with recent research on near misses, illustrates just how close we have come to the brink. The only way to guarantee the security that we all seek, is through the total elimination of nuclear weapons and their prohibition. It is indeed an anomaly that nuclear weapons remain the only weapons of mass destruction that have yet to be subjected to a comprehensive, global prohibition. South Africa has no doubt that Conferences like these offer the international community an inclusive platform and will contribute towards the establishment of higher norms against nuclear weapons.

Whilst some argue that there is a need to create the necessary conditions for nuclear disarmament, we believe that these conditions were already established with the entry-into-force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), reinforced by the ‘bargain’ associated with its indefinite extension and the subsequent unequivocal undertaking made to the total
elimination of nuclear weapons. Any justifications for retaining such weapons would therefore be irresponsible, as they amount to encouraging proliferation, thereby undermining the very Treaty that such States claim to uphold. As the UN Secretary General correctly asserted, there are no right hands for wrong weapons. In addition, any justifications for the associated maintenance and modernization programmes and the vast resources diverted for this purpose are unsustainable in a world where the basic needs of billions, including the achievement of the developmental goals agreed to at the turn of the century, cannot be met.

It is inconceivable that the use of nuclear weapons could ever, under any circumstances, be consistent with international law, particularly international humanitarian law. These weapons are not only morally unacceptable, but clearly have no credible military utility. The unsubstantiated claim and illusion that they deter conflict and war has proven to be just that. What is also clear is that these weapons have proven to be a constant source of insecurity and driver of further proliferation. States possessing or relying on such weapons cannot promote the virtues of nuclear weapons as so-called instruments of security, while simultaneously assuming the moral high ground in promoting nuclear non-proliferation.

Chairperson,

Next year, with the 2015 NPT Review Conference (RevCon), the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly and the 70th commemoration of the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, several opportunities will present themselves for progress in nuclear disarmament. The question is whether we will seize these opportunities or continue to fail to fulfil our obligations. We cannot afford the continuation of hollow arguments and circular processes that have thus far characterised those bodies mandated by the international community to advance nuclear disarmament, and which seem to perpetuate the status quo. The time has come for us to bring a decisive end to what amounts to ‘nuclear apartheid’, where ‘might’ appears to trump ‘right’. As responsible States, we have an obligation – both individually and collectively – to protect our people from the ravages of a weapon, which poses a clear and present danger to the very survival of humanity. All States, irrespective of whether they possess or rely on nuclear weapons or not, have an equal stake in the establishment and maintenance of a nuclear-weapons-free world.

South Africa supports the growing call for the construction of a legally-binding agreement or agreements that should guide our efforts. We have no set conclusions as to what this should look like or about the sequencing of the implementation of the mutually reinforcing elements that are needed to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. However, we believe this must be the product of an open multilateral process; contain clear benchmarks and timelines; ensure transparent, verifiable and irreversible nuclear disarmament measures; and importantly move us closer to the achievement of the ultimate objective that we seek.
An agreement of this nature is in keeping with our obligations under Article VI of the NPT, which enjoins us “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measure relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament”. As a starting point, we urge all States to support the proposal of the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) to utilise all available fora to explore options to elaborate effective measures.

As the only country to have developed and then voluntarily destroyed its nuclear weapons, South Africa has always viewed humanitarian imperatives as the very centre of our efforts. Our position evolved from and was shaped by our experiences during South Africa’s struggle for freedom. We know all too well the devastation associated with the nuclear tests conducted in and around the African Continent and the constant danger of the apartheid regime’s nuclear weapons, which loomed large in our lives and those of our neighbours. We have noted the appeals of some States for practical and realistic measures, yet by our own actions we have illustrated what indeed can and must be done. We therefore not only have a legal obligation, but also a moral responsibility to contribute to the humanitarian initiative. We are currently considering options, including our role in any follow-on activities and meetings.

In the immediate future, we expect that this matter will take pride of place in the outcome of the 2015 NPT RevCon, given that it constitutes the very foundation of the Treaty. As such, we stand ready to play our part in strengthening the effective implementation of the Treaty and in realizing its objectives. The implementation of the solemn agreements reached in 1995, 2000 and 2010 by NPT States Parties can no longer be postponed. We owe it to the memory of the victims of these weapons and their families, some of whom are with us today, to ensure that we save future generations from the horrors that they had to confront.

I thank you.