It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. The fact that nearly 160 States, many international organisations, civil society and researchers from all over the world are here, is very encouraging for us.

In the world after the Cold War in which I grew up, most people seemed to stop worrying about nuclear weapons. They were seen as a relic from the past, only an abstract danger which didn’t matter very much. But this is fundamentally wrong! The fact is: Over 16,000 nuclear warheads still exist - distributed among 14 countries and throughout the oceans - many of them on high alert and ready for use on short notice. And we have to be clear: As long as nuclear weapons exist, the risk of their use - on purpose or by accident - remains real.

Ladies and gentlemen, States that possess nuclear weapons consider them as important for their security - that nuclear weapons deter war precisely because of their destructive force. It is therefore no surprise that progress on nuclear disarmament has been so slow. But whatever value is given to nuclear weapons, it must be seen in the context of the risks that these weapons carry. Today we know more about these risks. Human error, technical flaws and cyber security among them. These risks can never be eliminated completely. Actually humankind has been very lucky on several occasions in the past. But can we continue to rely on luck for our safety?

Today we also know that the consequences of a single nuclear explosion would be even more terrifying and long-lasting than we thought. It would result in an
immediate humanitarian emergency of enormous scale, an emergency that would not be constrained by national borders, but have regional and global effects. No national or international organisation is capable of dealing with such terrible consequences. In such a scenario nobody would win, everybody would lose.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are enough reasons for urgent action on nuclear weapons - and why we should focus on their risks and their humanitarian consequences. Austria wants strong international rules on nuclear weapons: a strong NPT and the CTBT in force. But most of all we want to see a new momentum for concrete progress on global nuclear disarmament. In the follow-up of the conferences in Norway and in Mexico we hope that our discussions in Vienna will contribute to this aim.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all agree that the world would be a better one without nuclear weapons. This objective has been stated over and over again, in legally binding treaties, in the UN, in countless policy statements over the past decades. It is high time to move from words to real action! We need to challenge old thinking, we need to take in the knowledge of experts, the voices of civil society and we need much more global awareness. I look forward to our discussions and would wish that this conference can be a step leading to a world without nuclear weapons.

Thank you for your attention.