Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, allow me to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria for convening this important conference. Thank you also for inviting the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to participate in this panel on Scenarios, Challenges and Capabilities regarding Nuclear Weapons Use and Other Events.

In the next few minutes I would like to build on OCHA’s previous talks in Oslo and Nayarit and provide some further reflections on the humanitarian community’s capacity to respond to a nuclear weapon detonation event. In doing so, I will draw on the very comprehensive and thought provoking study An Illusion of Safety, written by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, with the support of UNDP and OCHA. The Study was instigated to get a better sense of the humanitarian challenges specific to a nuclear weapons detonation event, and the extent to which the humanitarian system could respond.

The Study builds on the earlier discussions in Oslo and Nayarit, in which OCHA and other humanitarian organizations have been engaged. Those discussions have been instrumental in prompting us to consider our role and capacity in responding to nuclear weapons detonations. And this is important for a number of reasons.

First, because we have not, as a humanitarian system, undertaken any recent analysis of the extent to which we could respond to a nuclear weapon detonation, as opposed to a radiological emergency or civil nuclear accident of which we have some experience.

Nonetheless, we readily accept the reality that since nuclear weapons exist, the risk of their detonation does too, be it caused deliberately or inadvertently.

This is the second reason why we need to consider our ability to respond: as long as the threat of nuclear weapon detonation is greater than zero, we have a responsibility to consider the extent to which we can, as a humanitarian community, respond.

After all, it will always be possible and necessary to mount some form of response to assist victims. The important question is how effective and meaningful that response will be in terms of saving life and alleviating suffering.
Here, the UNIDIR Study sheds important, and in some cases, new light.

For one thing, the Study confirms the Oslo Conference’s first finding. You will recall that it found that it is unlikely that any State or international body could address the immediate humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapon detonation in an adequate manner and provide sufficient assistance to those affected. [The Study found that even the most specialised military radiological and nuclear units are mostly oriented for force protection rather than humanitarian assistance.] Moreover, it might not be possible to establish such capacities.

The Study noted that as a humanitarian system we have some experience of, and have learned important lessons from, dealing with, civil nuclear accidents, including those of the 1986 Chernobyl and 2011 Fukushima nuclear power-plant disasters. However, the Study reinforces the fact that nuclear weapon detonations are different in important respects from civil nuclear emergencies, not to mention humanitarian crises resulting from conventional armed conflict and natural disasters.

It should be recalled here that even a single, “low-yield” nuclear explosive device would cause vast physical destruction. Alongside blast and heat, intense and harmful ionizing radiation is created within the zone of a nuclear bomb’s direct effects. So a nuclear weapon detonation in a highly populated area would be a humanitarian disaster. Moreover, it could blow large amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere, which would travel long distances and endanger human health.

UNIDIR’s Study has also deepened our understanding that responding to a nuclear weapon detonation would be anything but “business as usual”. We cannot assume that current planning and approaches to humanitarian response are sufficient or can be easily applied to responding to one nuclear weapon detonation event, let alone many.

Recognising that the United Nations coordinated humanitarian system has many immediate priorities and faces challenges of different kinds, are there nonetheless some feasible steps that we, the international humanitarian community could take to better prepare ourselves for the challenges of humanitarian response to a nuclear weapon detonation event?

The Study suggests there are, including more in-depth analysis of our internal decision-making and risk assessment procedures, and the practical delivery of assistance. The Study recommends that a clearer, self-directed evaluation of the humanitarian system’s capacities would be a desirable starting point. Importantly, prior evaluation and planning would help us to understand the real practical limits on what is possible to assist the victims—and the significant risks for humanitarian staff in doing so in many scenarios.

Even if there is not much the humanitarian system could do in the immediate aftermath, attention to such issues has the potential to reduce the overall level of suffering and harm in
the event of a nuclear weapon detonation, resulting, for example, from nuclear fallout or the displacement of people, within and across borders, and how we would respond to this.

Finally, the Study underlines the importance of eliminating the source of risk. Indeed, in addition to its specific findings, the Study reminds us that until we achieve a world free of nuclear weapons, these devices will continue to pose the risk of catastrophic consequences for humanity – whatever (little) the United Nations and its humanitarian partners can do to pick up the pieces.

The United Nations has long supported the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons. Clearly we must all redouble our efforts to bring that about. That includes the humanitarian and development communities, in view of our stake in prevention. Recent reports by the UN Secretary-General, UNDP and OCHA have underlined both the immediate and longer-term human consequences of radiation-related emergencies. It is not difficult to see that nuclear weapon use would disrupt the achievement of broader global goals in development, public health and human wellbeing.

These are just a few reactions to the Study. It includes a number of detailed recommendations which warrant more in-depth discussion within the humanitarian community.

For example, the Study’s findings could be put for consideration in the coming months to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which is the primary inter-agency mechanism for the coordination of humanitarian assistance. In this regard, the Study makes a number of suggestions that relate to improving the humanitarian community’s preparedness to respond – to some degree at least- to a nuclear weapon detonation event, even as it observes that this would inevitably be a case of helping to pick up the pieces as best we can. These are useful starting points for our work.

Ultimately though, the reality remains that the only sensible course of action is to ensure these weapons are never used.

Thank you for your attention.