Dear UK intervention at Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons 8-9 December 2014

Thank you, Chairman. I have listened to the debate very carefully, and with interest.

Many have argued, with great force, that devastating humanitarian consequences could result from the use of nuclear weapons. The United Kingdom agrees. The point is not new: it was written into the Preamble of the Non Proliferation Treaty in 1968, and captured in the outcome document of the first Special Session on Disarmament in 1978.

The question is what conclusions we draw.

The UK’s view is that the utmost importance must be given to avoiding any use of nuclear weapons, to preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon technology, and to keeping nuclear weapons safe and secure. The UK is very active in all these areas. That is why we are working hard, and will continue to work hard, to ensure a successful Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference next spring. We call on all other States Party to do the same.

The UK agrees that we must also pursue the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, and we are active here too.

Some have argued that the way to this goal is to ban nuclear weapons now, or to fix a timetable for their elimination.

The UK considers that this approach fails to take account of, and therefore jeopardises, the stability and security which nuclear weapons can help to ensure.

A declaratory ban, or a timetable not underpinned by the necessary trust, confidence and verification measures, would jeopardise strategic stability. None of us would gain from a loss of that stability.

The UK believes that the step-by-step approach through the NPT is the only way to combine the imperatives of disarmament and of maintaining global stability. Progress is difficult, but possible. The US and Russia have reduced their weapons stockpiles massively. The UK has reduced its number of warheads from around 460 at its peak. Our current commitment is to reduce to 180 by the mid-2020s.

We will work to create the conditions in which nuclear weapons are no longer needed. We will also maintain a minimum credible nuclear deterrent for as long as it is necessary.

Let me underline that the United Kingdom believes that the UN Disarmament Machinery and the Non Proliferation Treaty provide the right forum for working towards a world without nuclear weapons, taking full account not only of the devastating humanitarian impact which could result from a use of nuclear weapons, but also of the stability and security which nuclear weapons provide.