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PERMANENT MISSION OF AUSTRIA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Statement by

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Republic of Austria**

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Check against delivery

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is **good to be back** in New York, here in this hall.

Flying here to attend the opening of the General Assembly
is something that once seemed like a **routine undertaking**.

But this past year made it **something very special again**.

A sign that **things are finally moving in the right direction**.

We all know, the pandemic is **not yet in our rearview mirror**.

But the world is slowly finding its footing, one vaccination at a time.

And yet, we already know that **some things have fundamentally changed**.

The virus has **brutally exposed our fragility**.

The fragility of our **social fabric**, of our **health systems**,
of our **economies** and of our **lives**.

The virus **destroyed our illusion that human progress is a one-way street.**

- **124 mio. people went from being poor to needing to fight for their very survival.**
- **While millions more don't know where their next meal will come from.**
- **Over 250 mio. people lost their jobs and are without a pay-check to support their families.**

In the **blink of an eye,**
we lost decades of hard-earned development gains.

And we will **lose even more**
if we **cannot ensure that**
everyone has **access to the vaccine as soon as possible.**

This is our **only exit ticket out of the pandemic!**

That is why **COVAX** is probably
one of the **most important initiatives of our time.**

It has so far **shipped over 300 million vaccine doses to 142 countries.**

As part of Team Europe, **Austria** is among the **lead contributors** to COVAX.

We were the **first country** providing **our neighbourhood, the Western Balkans**,
with much needed doses through the **EU Vaccine Sharing Mechanism**.

Austria also **donated over 2 mio. doses bilaterally** to our partners from **Georgia, Lebanon, Tunisia, Ukraine and Iran**.

And as **host to the Vienna UN Headquarter**,
we spared no effort in **keeping UN personnel and their families safe**,
including through vaccination.

However, an **enormous task** still lies ahead of us.

We have **to massively accelerate the international vaccine distribution**.

It is perfectly clear and we all know it:
in this pandemic **no one is safe until everyone is safe!**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Covid-19 **added fuel to the fire of existing geopolitical tensions.**

A ring of crises and conflicts spans the globe

- In **Yemen** and **Syria**,
where many children have known nothing but conflict and deprivation.
- In **Ethiopia** and **Nagorno-Karabakh**,
where long-standing fault lines have erupted.
- Or in **Belarus**, in **Myanmar** or in **Nicaragua**,
where some have used the pandemic as a carte blanche
to ignore human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We have to **send them all the clear message**
that our **fight for human rights**,
our **engagement for fundamental freedoms**
know no lockdown.

This fight, this engagement
was **never an easy or straightforward mission.**

It is a continuous battle marked by progress
but also by bitter setbacks.

How demanding and problematic this struggle can be,
became clear again in **Afghanistan**.

After 20 years of engagement,
it seems that we are now **back at square one**.

It seems that much of the social, **political and economic progress** is
slipping through our fingers like sand.

We are **all faced with the same question: what shall we do now?**

From my perspective, the answer is clear:

We cannot turn our back on the people of Afghanistan!

The **consequences would be felt**, above all, by the millions of **women and girls, human rights defenders and minorities** who face an uncertain future.

We have to **remain engaged** and
we have to **offer the urgently needed humanitarian aid**.

That is why **Austria** will provide a total of **20 mio. Euro**
in humanitarian emergency aid to Afghanistan and the region.

But we also have to **spell out our clear expectations** of the new ruling power in Kabul.

There can be **no blank checks for the Taliban!**

Fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular for **women and girls**, are **simply non-negotiable!**

We have to do **everything to prevent** Afghanistan from turning into a **black hole** with the capacity to **destabilise the whole region**.

And we have to **drive home the message** to the Taliban that **the world's eyes are on them**.

We don't want Afghanistan to turn into an **incubator or a safe haven for international terrorism and extremism**.

This requires a **coordinated international effort and coordinated messaging**.

I believe that in particular the **immediate neighbours and other Muslim countries** can and should play a **central role in this endeavour**.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Some **gleefully describe Afghanistan as a failure of the West.**

As a proof of the **inevitable decline of our democratic system of governance.**

As a **breakdown of our values.**

And it is true that Afghanistan holds **many bitter lessons.**

Lessons we **need to take to heart.**

But from my perspective one thing is very clear:

We should **not fall into defeatism, self-doubts or despair.**

Our answer cannot lie in a **cynical inward turning** away from our partners and allies.

The days of a **moral gunboat policy** may be over.

But, the values that **the Free World fought and stood for in Afghanistan**
and for which we **stand and fight for in so many other places**
around the world
continue to be the **right ones.**

They are the ones which give **individuals freedom**
and the **capacity to live up to their potential**:

Rationalism, rule of law, equality, human rights and liberal democracy.

In the end, it all **boils down to one question: how we want to live.**

As a strong believer in the democratic system, my answer is simple:

**I want to live in a world and I want my children and my future
grandchildren to grow up in a world**

where the freedom of **expression**, of **religion** or **belief**, the freedom
of **assembly** and the rights of **minorities**
are **not just noble sentiments, but an everyday reality.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The pandemic has brought home to us the simple truth
of how **interconnected and interdependent** we all are.

We all **learned the hard way**
that we cannot **overcome a challenge** like this on our own.

Despite forcing us into **social distancing**,
it **brought us closer as a human family**.

Let us use this lesson to tackle the next crisis that is already upon us.

Compared to the Covid-19 pandemic, which **burst into our lives** like an explosion,
it is like a **slow burning, smouldering fire, creeping up on us**.

I am talking about **climate change**.

Austria will continue to be **at the vanguard**,
when it comes to **ambitious and bold green recovery and climate action**.

And there are other tectonic shifts that will fundamentally alter the way we live.

New and emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence or quantum computing are racing ahead, leaving many of us behind.

We have to make sure that our **human centric approach** applies **online** as well as **offline**.

New technologies are no new frontier where human rights do not exist!

We need to **define clear red lines that we as humankind are not willing to cross**.

This includes **stepping back from creating killing machines - lethal autonomous weapons systems** - systems where an algorithm decides in a split second who lives and who dies.

Last week, Austria organised a **conference** to ensure **meaningful human control** over these weapons.

Together with partner countries and civil society, we hope to establish a **process** leading to a **ban of killer robots**.

Austria will continue to be a **driving force** for **disarmament and arms control**.

We cannot increase our security by increasing our potential to destroy.

And, most of all, by **hanging on to the myth of nuclear deterrence**.

We need to **eliminate these horrendous weapons of mass destruction**.

Their **prohibition** is a first step.

Austria looks forward to hosting the **First Meeting of States Parties** to the **Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons** in Vienna next March.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

No nation state can shoulder today's and tomorrow's challenges on its own.

We need neighbours,
we need partners,
we need strong multilateral institutions.

Austria strongly supports the **vision of the Secretary General for a UN 2.0.**

Our multilateral system conceived in the 20th century
needs to be made fit for the 21st.

Let us not get **dragged down by bureaucratic inertia.**
Let us be **bold and daring!**

As a medium sized country, **Austria knows the value of a strong United Nations.**

We know that our security depends on the **rule of law instead of the law of the jungle.**

The rule of law will be in the centre of our efforts when elected to the **Security Council for the term 2027-28.**

Ladies and gentlemen!

When I met with the **President of the General Assembly** in Vienna recently,

he told me that the **guiding light of his Presidency is “hope”**.

I believe **no maxim could be more fitting**.

It reminded me of something **Winston Churchill** once said:

**“All the greatest things are simple,
and many can be expressed in a single word”**.

So, as we face the challenges ahead,

here are some of the words I want to guide us:

tolerance, trust, solidarity, truth, justice, compassion, humility and hope.

Thank you!