Media Release:

Bishop urged to stop weaselling and support ban on nuclear weapons

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Lowy Institute, 1 Bligh St, Sydney CBD

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop will be greeted by a giant weasel at the Lowy Institute, where she will deliver a speech on Monday, less than two weeks from the federal election.

At recent UN meetings discussing the need for a new legal instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, Australia was part of a loose group of nuclear-allied ‘weasel’ nations opposing a ban treaty.

The weasel symbolises Australia’s international reputation as a country committed to defending the interests of the nuclear-armed states while claiming to support nuclear disarmament.

“We are urging Julie Bishop to change Australia’s weasel status and join the 128 nations that are ready to ban nuclear weapons,” said Gem Romuld of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

The Australian Labor Party declared support for a ban in its new national platform, adopted in July 2015. A 2014 Nielsen poll showed that 84% of Australians want the government to support a ban.

“It is likely that negotiations for a ban treaty will begin in 2017. We want the Australian Government to move beyond the cold-war ideology that is preventing meaningful action on nuclear disarmament. A ban treaty is the vital next step for the elimination of these weapons of ultimate horror,” said Gem Romuld.

For further comment:

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A BAN IS COMING: background briefing

Nuclear weapons are the only weapons of mass destruction that have not been explicitly banned. A renewed movement for nuclear disarmament is gaining momentum worldwide; it is increasingly likely that the world will see a global ban against nuclear weapons negotiated within the next few years. The global majority supports a ban. 128 countries have signed the Austrian-sponsored “Humanitarian Pledge” to ‘fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons’. More and more governments are declaring their support and determination to begin negotiations on a ban treaty.

UN Open Ended Working Group (OEWG), Geneva

A resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly last year paved the way for an open-ended working group (OEWG) to hold three meetings during 2016 to pave the way for negotiations on a new legal instrument to begin. The first two sessions, one in late February and another in early May, ended on a resolute note – a ban treaty is coming.

While the February session explored the idea of a ban treaty, the May session confirmed it as the preferred next step. Governments discussed in detail what terms they would like to see included in a ban treaty; prohibitions on the use, threat of use, development, testing, acquisition and stockpiling of weapons. A group of nine countries (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico and Zambia) proposed a conference to negotiate the legally binding ban treaty in 2017. A small group of countries, non-nuclear states who claim protection from the “nuclear umbrella”, remain stubbornly convinced that the pre-existing and painfully slow disarmament initiatives are the only way forward. Their opposition to the ban has earned them the nickname ‘weasels’ for claiming to support nuclear disarmament while working to maintain the status-quo.

The success of the February and May sessions will likely lead to a resolution presented to the UN General Assembly recommending the start of negotiations on a ban treaty as early as October this year. The final session of the OEWG will take place in August 2016.

“Weasel” Australia

Australia, unfortunately, has been one of the most vocal and committed weasels. Australia does not own nuclear weapons and has a history of being a nuclear testing ground yet it insists that “extended nuclear deterrence” or the “nuclear umbrella” plays a central role in national security. The Coalition dismissed a ban as ‘emotionally appealing but impractical’ for security interests. Australia attended both sessions of the OEWG – in the February session, it spoke out loudly against the possibility of a ban, but notably in May, the representatives opted for a more neutral position while in caretaker mode, reflecting divergent policies of the Coalition Government and the Australian Labor Party.

The ALP committed support for a nuclear weapons ban treaty in its policy platform, which was passed at the July 2015 National Conference. The party has said that it “firmly supports the negotiation of a global treaty banning nuclear weapons” and “welcomes the growing global movement of nations supporting this objective.”