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PLATFORM

Banning nuclear weapons

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The approach of the international community to the existence of nuclear weapons is going through a transformation. The renewed focus on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that any use of nuclear weapons would cause is bringing together new alliances of states, international organisations and civil society – the latter under the umbrella of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). In these new alliances, forged in abhorrence at the immediate and long-term implications of nuclear weapon detonation, are the foundations of a movement towards a treaty that bans nuclear weapons and provides the framework for their elimination.

The use of a nuclear weapon on a major populated area would immediately kill tens if not hundreds of thousands of people – mothers, fathers and children. Hundreds of thousands more would be alive but injured – in a devastated and toxic environment in which any capacity to assist them would fall far short of overwhelming demand. Beyond the direct effects of blinding light, searing heat, crushing blast pressure, and poisonous radiation, a nuclear detonation would also cripple communications and destroy the infrastructure upon which society depends. Whilst a single nuclear detonation would cause immediate and long term harm on an unacceptable scale, the use of multiple nuclear weapons risks atmospheric changes that would impair global food production, starving people living far from the conflict zone.

On the 4-5th of March 2013, delegates from 127 countries, alongside international organisations and civil society partners of ICAN, met in Oslo (Norway) and focused on these facts. The Chair's summary of the meeting concluded 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. Moreover, it might not be possible to establish such capacities, even if it were attempted.

The historical experience from the use and testing of nuclear weapons has demonstrated their devastating immediate and long-term effects. While political circumstances have changed, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons remains.

The effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective of its cause, will not be constrained by national borders, and will affect states and people in significant ways, regionally as well as globally.

In the context of these conclusions, the Government of Mexico announced that it would hold a follow-up conference to Oslo (probably in early 2014) and other states also indicated a willingness to host further meetings.

Whilst 'further meetings' is not in itself a radical departure from the diplomatic norm, the content, tone and composition of the Oslo meeting were a striking break from the more or less moribund discussions around nuclear weapons that take place elsewhere. The decision by the five nuclear armed states that sit as permanent members of the UN Security Council (the P5) to boycott the meeting opened up the space for other state delegations to recognize that this was a humanitarian issue on which they had a right to speak, and a responsibility to search for solutions. Whilst the P5 boycott is understood to have resulted primarily from the pleadings of France for a collective justification for their non-attendance, the assertions by the UK and others that the Oslo meeting was a 'distraction' seemed callous in light of the subject matter and material being presented. It is hard to believe that detailed consideration of the mechanisms that would cause thousands of deaths and injuries is a distraction from thinking seriously about how we should consider these weapons. Having taken a collective stand against participation in Oslo it is also very unlikely these states will be able to participate in subsequent meetings of this track of work.

Whilst the non-participation of these nuclear armed states may at first sight seem a problem, in fact it benefits the process through the empowerment of other countries – an empowerment that is vital to changing the international rules regarding nuclear weapons. For too long all of the negotiating power has been given to the states that would cling on to these weapons (despite their rhetorical commitments to the contrary). Built on a fact-based consideration of the humanitarian threat that nuclear weapons pose, the boldness of this developing movement comes from its refusal to be held hostage by the nuclear armed states.

The UK-based NGO Article 36 has suggested three key 'framings' for a treaty banning nuclear weapons. First, a treaty banning nuclear weapons would build on rather than contradict existing international instruments on nuclear weapons. It is not a rejection of, or protest against, the progress being made in other fora. Second, such a treaty would also build on, extend and strengthen the existing 'Nuclear Weapon Free Zones', which currently cover some 115 countries. It would not need to be formally dependent on those zones, but would provide an architecture that allows any individual state to participate in this legal rejection of nuclear weapons, even if its neighbours are not yet ready to do the same. Finally, with treaty prohibitions already in place on chemical and biological weapons, nuclear weapons are the only weapons of mass destruction not yet comprehensively outlawed. Such a process would resolve that anomaly and make nuclear weapons clearly illegal.

Outlawing nuclear weapons – making them illegal – would in turn shape how these weapons are discussed and considered in the world. It would affect how states that are party to such a treaty can invest in or assist nuclear weapons production, storage or use by others. Most importantly, it would further strengthen the stigma against these weapons – changing how the international discussion of these weapons is framed, greatly increasing pressure towards disarmament and reframing current 'modernization' decisions taking place in a number of nuclear armed states. It will reaffirm that the international community has not relaxed into an acceptance of the threat these weapons pose but continues to see nuclear weapons as an unacceptable horror in the hands of a few.