Background
If just one of the world’s 17,000 nuclear weapons were detonated, intentionally or accidentally, it would kill thousands of people instantly and spread its long-term effects across boarders and generations. And as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has concluded, first responders would be unable to provide the emergency relief so urgently needed.1 This makes the continued existence and deployment of nuclear weapons one of the most serious humanitarian challenges of our time.

Nuclear weapons have been used twice in warfare—by the United States on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. More than 210,000 people died, while many more suffered acute injuries. In addition, over 2000 nuclear tests have been carried out, with widespread environmental and health impacts on surrounding communities.

Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power and the threat they pose to the environment and human survival. They release vast amounts of energy in the form of blast, heat, and radiation. In addition to causing tens of millions of immediate deaths, a regional nuclear war involving around 100 Hiroshima-sized weapons would disrupt the global climate and agricultural production so severely that more than a billion people would be at risk of famine.2 Despite this, no comprehensive prohibition of this weapon yet exists. Nuclear weapons are valued by a minority of states as tools of security and “deterrence”. They are discussed as tools of international politics rather than as the unacceptable source of human suffering, environmental destruction, and economic waste that they truly are.

Therefore, discussions about nuclear weapons must focus not on narrow concepts of national security, but on the effects of these weapons on human beings—our health, our societies, and the
environment on which we all depend for our lives and livelihoods. The humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons must inform and motivate efforts to outlaw and eliminate these weapons.

Current context
In March 2013, the Norwegian government held a conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. This marked the first time governments have ever met to discuss this topic. The Oslo conference was influential in reframing the debate on nuclear weapons and building the argument that nuclear weapons should be banned because of their unacceptable humanitarian impacts. 128 states participated in the Oslo conference alongside international organisations and civil society, demonstrating substantial interest in addressing the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The conference 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.”

One of the most important results of the Oslo conference was the announcement by Mexico that it would host another meeting on this topic to continue the discussions. The meeting in Mexico has the opportunity to become a significant step towards banning and eliminating nuclear weapons.

Recommendations for governments
During First Committee, governments should:
• Highlight that any use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. As shown through data presented at the Oslo conference, the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapon use make it imperative to prevent any use or accidental detonation of a nuclear weapon.
• Welcome the announcement by Mexico to hold a follow-up conference in February 2014, emphasize the importance of continuing the discussion on humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and declare an intention to participate in this conference.
• Acknowledge that the current deadlock of the disarmament machinery is not acceptable and state that new ways of preventing a humanitarian catastrophe must be explored.
• Reiterate that the catastrophic humanitarian impact of any use of nuclear weapons underscores the urgent need for a ban on nuclear weapons.
• Highlight the importance of outlawing and eliminating nuclear weapons now.

3 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway Espen Barth Eide “Chair’s summary Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons”, 4-5 March 2013.