First Committee 2013 civil society presentations
Weapons of mass destruction

Introduction

While this statement will focus on weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—in particular chemical and nuclear weapons—we stress that the grave violations of human rights and international law perpetrated by the possession and use of WMD are matched by equally grave violations from so-called conventional weapons and high-tech tools of death and destruction. These weapons will be dealt with in subsequent presentations today.

Chemical weapons

Amidst the backdrop of a bloody armed conflict in Syria, in which over 100,000 people have been killed and over seven million have been internally displaced or made to flee their country, chemical weapons have once again been used against human beings.

In an abhorrent and illegal act of violence, chemical weapons were used in Syria on 21 August in the Ghouta area of Damascus. This action resulted in numerous casualties, particularly among civilians. Those responsible for this heinous act should be brought to justice.

The use of chemical weapons is a serious violation of international law, regardless of which party to the conflict perpetrated the attack. The prohibition against chemical weapons is binding on governments and armed groups alike. This prohibition has been created through the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. The former prohibits use while the latter outlaws the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer, or use of these WMD.

But the use of chemical weapons, however abhorrent and illegal, should not be used as a pretext for unilateral military intervention. All states should recognize it as an indication that the complex of overlapping conflicts in the region are spiraling out of control. The discovery that chemical weapons have been used should only be more cause for collective alarm. The opening provided by the agreement to a framework for the elimination of Syria’s chemical weapons should only be a starting point for urgent efforts to eliminate all weapons of mass destruction in the region. A key step would be moving forward quickly with the conference on a WMD free zone in the Middle East, committed to by all parties to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty at the 2010 Review Conference.

We are relieved that the push for war by some governments has been tempered by the accession of the Syrian government to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the UN Security Council’s resolution on a framework for the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria. We note that the framework will need realistic timelines and expectations, especially considering that Russia and the United States have been unable to meet their legal obligations to destroy their stockpiles by the deadlines set by the Chemical Weapons Convention. We also underscore the ongoing suffering of the Syrian people caused by conventional weapons, in particular the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Thus there must be reinvigorated efforts to convene a conference to bring the conflict in Syria to an end. We call on the US, Russia, and all parties that provide direct or indirect military and logistical support to warring parties in Syria to use all available diplomatic means to bring about an immediate cease-fire and negotiated peace, to cease transferring arms to any parties to the conflict, and to provide humanitarian assistance.

Nuclear weapons
The situation in Syria serves to once again underscore the dangers inherent in the possession of all WMD. So long as such weapons exist, there is a risk they will be used. We are particularly concerned with the continued existence of nuclear weapons, which are orders of magnitude more destructive than chemical or biological weapons. They are the only weapon capable of destroying civilization and most life on earth.

Many of today’s 17,000-plus nuclear weapons are kept on high alert, ready for use within minutes. The use of chemical weapons in Syria has been met with abhorrence and condemnation, as well as demands that the Syrian government make every effort to secure and destroy them. These same reactions and demands should be leveled at those states posing such a persistent, impending nuclear threat to humanity.

It is anomalous—and unacceptable—that nuclear weapons, the “weapon of mass destruction” that poses the greatest danger to the future of humanity, remains the only one lacking a comprehensive legal prohibition and framework for their elimination.

All states have a role in establishing a binding legal norm against the possession of nuclear weapons. All nuclear-armed states have a particular duty to come into compliance with their international obligations to disarm. It is long past time to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The 189 states parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty have acknowledged that any use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. This March a landmark conference was held in Oslo on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. It was attended by 128 governments and representatives of UN agencies, the Red Cross, and civil society. The chair of the conference concluded that “the effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective of cause, will not be constrained by national borders, and will affect states and people in significant ways, regionally as well as globally.” Following from this, just last week in this Committee, Ambassador Dell Higgie of New Zealand read out a statement signed by 124 governments expressing deep concern for the catastrophic consequences that any use of nuclear weapons would entail.

No UN member state is immune from these devastating effects—which will be examined in further detail at a major conference hosted by Mexico next February. The existence of nuclear weapons anywhere is a threat to people everywhere: a threat to the environment, to development, to economies, to health, to agriculture, to the climate. Eliminating nuclear weapons is a global humanitarian imperative of the highest order. It demands our urgent attention and concerted efforts.

For too long, nuclear-armed states have set the rules for themselves; they have determined the agenda. And they have chosen to act against the interests of their own citizens and of the international community. We must no longer tolerate their failure not only to disarm but their proclivity to squander significant opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Of the three major diplomatic processes to advance nuclear disarmament efforts that took place this year, the NPT nuclear-armed states boycotted two. They used the one process in which they did participate—the General Assembly high-level meeting—to disparage the rationale, importance, and relevance of the very forum they were in.

No nation, big or small, can legitimately wield weapons capable of destroying entire cities with a single explosion. The double standards that pervade the current nuclear non-proliferation regime provide no foundation for a just, peaceful and secure world. As the UN Secretary-General remarked in January of this year: “There are no right hands for wrong weapons.” We must challenge all nuclear-armed nations—as well as those nations that host US nuclear weapons on their soil or support the use of nuclear weapons in their name—to reject these weapons of mass destruction.

The only effective guarantee against the use of nuclear weapons is to outlaw and eliminate them without further delay. There have been many suggestions on ways forward. A model treaty has been put forward...
by Malaysia and Costa Rica. The Open-Ended Working Group on nuclear disarmament held in-depth discussions, with ample civil society participation, of proposals to take forward multilateral negotiations on the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons. The UN Secretary-General has put forward a five-point proposal on nuclear disarmament.

Only a month ago, the General Assembly hosted a high-level meeting, at which the overwhelming majority of governments declared their opposition to the continued existence of nuclear weapons and demanded action to eliminate this scourge once and for all. Many of those participating in the high-level meeting called for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. Far from being a distant dream, this is an urgent necessity. The Non-Aligned Movement has submitted a new resolution at First Committee calling for the urgent commencement of negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention and for a high-level UN conference no later than 2018 to review progress made in this regard. However, this resolution calls for such negotiations to take place in the context of the Conference on Disarmament, which has been deadlocked for more than 16 years. These negotiations should take place in any viable venue.

The nuclear armed states must stop talking about nuclear disarmament as an abstract goal for the future and start acting on past commitments long in abeyance. More than 40 years ago, the nuclear-armed signatories of the NPT agreed in Article VI to negotiate in good faith for “effective measures relating to early cessation of the arms race and to nuclear disarmament.” In 1996, the International Court of Justice unanimously found: “There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.” The parties to the NPT gave further meaning to this language at the 2000 Review Conference by committing to the unequivocal undertaking to eliminate nuclear arsenals, the principle of irreversibility, and the diminishing role of nuclear weapons to facilitate their elimination. In order to make these commitments a reality, all nuclear armed states must immediately cease the improvement of existing nuclear weapons and the development and manufacture of new ones. This should include not only bombs and warheads but nuclear-capable delivery systems. All nuclear weapons states also should cease the modernization of laboratories and factories where nuclear weapons research and manufacture are conducted. Such concrete actions would send an unambiguous signal that nuclear weapons do not have a future—something that mere reductions in the numbers of weapons in nuclear arsenals still of civilization-destroying proportions do not provide.

Strengthening and expanding nuclear weapons free zones supports the norm against possession and use of nuclear weapons, and also provides immediate security benefits for countries in nuclear-free regions. Continuing to highlight the humanitarian impacts and the application of international humanitarian law to nuclear weapons strengthens the norm against possession and use, and keeps the essential truth about these weapons—that they are too horrible and destructive to serve any human purpose—firmly in the foreground of disarmament forums and discourse.

With the nuclear-armed states continuing to refuse to engage in serious, multilateral negotiations for the elimination of nuclear arms, one option is for non-nuclear weapons states to begin the process themselves by banning nuclear weapons. Such an effort would both reinforce and concretize the norm against nuclear weapons possession and begin to explore concretely the opportunities for their elimination, as well as the obstacles that remain.

Underpinning the growing call for a nuclear weapons ban is a firm belief that it would have a significant impact beyond those states that may formally adopt such an instrument at the outset. A ban, once in force, would powerfully challenge any notion that possessing nuclear weapons is legitimate for particular states. It would stigmatize the weapons in the same way that chemical and biological weapons have been
stigmatized through international conventions. Banning nuclear weapons will also help build pressure and momentum to achieve and sustain a world free of these instruments of terror.

Conclusion

Humanity is facing unprecedented challenges in the 21st century: how to build a society that is more peaceful and fair while transforming the physical structure that sustains it to work within the energy balance and resource limits of our planet. Success will require unprecedented levels of cooperation both within and among nations. How we work together to eliminate nuclear weapons, the one human-created condition that could end civilization in short order, will provide the measure, and perhaps the model, for our ability to overcome these challenges.

Delivered by Ray Acheson, Reaching Critical Will, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

The following civil society organizations endorse this statement:

Action of Citizens for Nuclear Disarmament
Aotearoa Lawyers for Peace
Article 36
Basel Peace Office
Beati i costruttori di pace (Blessed Are the Peacemakers)
Code Pink
Colorado Coalition for the Prevention of Nuclear War
Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety
Disarmament and Security Centre
Global Action to Prevent War
Hereford Peace Council, UK
Hibakusha Stories
Hidankyo (Japan Confederation of A-and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations)
Human Survival Project at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies of the Sydney University
Institute for Policy Studies
Institute of Neurotoxicology & Neurological Disorders
International Association of Peace Messenger Cities
International Peace Bureau
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War
IKV Pax Christi (Netherlands)
Jeannette Rankin Peace Center
Just Foreign Policy
Layers Committee for Nuclear Policy
Los Alamos Study Group
Mayors for Peace
Mayors for Peace 2020 Vision Campaign
Mid-Missouri Peaceworks
Moana Nui Action Alliance
New Internationalism Project of the Institute for Policy Studies
Norwegian People’s Aid
Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
Nuclear Watch South
Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance
Pax Christi International
Pax Christi Montreal, Canada
Peace Action New York State
Peace Boat
Peace Depot, Inc
People for Nuclear Disarmament
Physicians for Global Survival
Project Ploughshares
Religions for Peace Canada
Reseau Sortir du Nucleaire
Rete Italiana Disarmo (Italian Disarmament Network)
Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center
SOA Watch
The Peace Foundation
The Ribbon International
Tri-Valley CAREs
TNT/FREE VANUNU
US Peace Council
WarIsACrime.org
WeAreWideAwake.org
Western States Legal Foundation
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom
World Federalist Movement – Canada
World Peace Now
World Without Wars