Background

There are still about 16,400 nuclear weapons in the world, each with a potential to unleash a humanitarian catastrophe. Despite commitments, steps, and action plans, the nine nuclear-armed states have continued to invest heavily in the modernisation of their nuclear arsenals, demonstrating their intention to maintain nuclear weapons for the indefinite future, and have been resistant to take on concrete measures for disarmament.

In response, more and more states are seeking a new legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons as an effective measure to promote nuclear disarmament and prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Calls for a new diplomatic process to ban nuclear weapons have received increasing prominence, including in the Chair’s summary from Nayarit.

Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power and the threat they pose to the environment and human survival. A single nuclear weapons detonation would kill an enormous number of people, injure even more, devastate housing and commercial buildings, destroy vital infrastructure, cause massive population displacement, and leave local emergency service capacities seriously degraded. A regional nuclear war involving around 100 Hiroshima-sized weapons would not only to cause tens of millions of immediate deaths; it could also disrupt the global climate and agricultural production severely.

It is not just the possibility of the intentional use of nuclear weapons that raises concerns. Recent reports about the near-use of nuclear weapons due to faulty detection systems, poorly executed security protocols, and error in human judgment, as well as several cases of security breaches, procedural errors, and oversights, highlights the danger of allowing these weapons to exist.

Although the unacceptable nature of nuclear weapons has been well established by international law (such as in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the 1996 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice), a prohibition of these weapons – comparable to other weapons of mass destruction such as chemical and biological weapons – has yet to be put in place.

Current context

In recent years, focus on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons has rapidly increased among governments, international organisations, and civil society representatives.

States have delivered several joint statements on this topic, the latest one garnering support...
from 125 states at the 2013 General Assembly’s First Committee. In addition, two international conferences on the topic have been held, one in March 2013 in Oslo, Norway and one in February 2014 in Nayarit, Mexico. A third conference is planned on 8-9 December 2014 in Vienna, Austria.

The Mexican Chair’s summary concluded, “in the past, weapons have been eliminated after they have been outlawed. We believe this is the path to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.” It went on to declare, “The broad-based and comprehensive discussions on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons should lead to the commitment of States and civil society to reach new international standards and norms, through a legally binding instrument. It is the view of the Chair that the Nayarit Conference has shown that time has come to initiate a diplomatic process conducive to this goal.”

In addition, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – the largest humanitarian organisation in the world, with close to 100 million volunteers and staff – has called for a binding agreement to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons.

It is time for all governments to use the 2014 session of the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security to voice support for starting negotiations on a treaty to outlaw the most destructive and inhumane weapon that has ever been created.
Recommendations for governments

During First Committee:

• Delegations should highlight that any use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences and that as shown through data presented at the Oslo and Nayarit conferences, the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapon use make it imperative to prevent any use or accidental detonation of a nuclear weapon.

• They should welcome the outcomes from the Oslo and Nayarit conferences and the decision by Austria to host a third conference, and declare their intention to participate in this conference.

• They should call for the immediate start of negotiations for a new legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons as a step towards their complete elimination.

Beyond First Committee:

• Governments should participate constructively in the meeting in Vienna on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.

• In advance of the 2015 NPT Review Conference, governments should increase pressure on the nuclear-armed states to fulfill their nuclear disarmament obligations.

• Governments should work with other states and civil society to establish a diplomatic process to ban nuclear weapons.


3 Juan Gomez Robledo, Under Secretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights of Mexico, “Chair’s summary, Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons”, 14 February 2014.