Republic of Palau

Panel III: Exchange of Views

Statement on Open-ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament

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Panel III on additional measures to increase awareness and understanding of the complexity of and interrelationship between the wide range of humanitarian consequences that would result from any nuclear detonation

Mr. Chairman,

Good morning to you, Chairman, and thank you for allowing me the floor. Allow me to begin by thanking the distinguished panellists for their excellent presentations, which were a powerful reminder of the unique existential threat that nuclear weapons continue to pose to all humanity. [I thank also Madam Setsuko Thurlow for her moving testimony and her courageous spirit.]

No nation is invulnerable to the catastrophic, far-reaching and long-lasting effects of nuclear weapons. Therefore, every nation – small or large, nuclear-free or nuclear-armed – has a direct stake in realizing a world without these indiscriminate, inhumane and immoral weapons.

Palau is proud to be the first nation in the world to have adopted a constitution banning nuclear weapons. Our region, the Pacific, has experienced the devastating impact of more than 300 nuclear tests, conducted over the course of half a century. The lived experience of people in our region informs our policies on nuclear disarmament and motivates us to speak out.

The effects of nuclear testing on our fragile ecology and the physical health and mental wellbeing of Pacific Islanders have been profound. Our region continues to experience epidemics of cancers, chronic diseases and congenital abnormalities as a result of the radioactive fallout that blanketed our homes and the vast Pacific Ocean on which we all depend for our livelihood.
In some Pacific Island states, entire atolls today remain unsafe for habitation, agricultural production and fishing. Some islanders have been permanently displaced from their homes and disconnected from their indigenous way of life. We in the Pacific have suffered, and continue to suffer, untold anguish, heartache and pain.

Mr. Chairman,

If we are to succeed in ridding the world of nuclear weapons – and we must – it will be crucial to increase public understanding of the horrific impact of nuclear detonations on people, our societies and the environment. The testimonies of survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as survivors of nuclear testing around the world, are of particular importance.

Palau is pleased to contribute to this working group a paper on the “Elements for a treaty banning nuclear weapons”. We submitted this together with our Pacific Island neighbours of Fiji, Nauru, Samoa and Tuvalu. I intend to present the paper in greater detail next week during the discussion on effective legal measures, but please allow me now to make two points that are pertinent to today’s debate.

Firstly, I wish to comment on the issue of victim assistance. The Humanitarian Pledge – which Palau has endorsed, together with 126 other states – acknowledges “the unacceptable harm that victims of nuclear weapons explosions and nuclear testing have experienced” and the fact that “the rights and needs of victims have not yet been adequately addressed”.

There is currently no international legal instrument to support the victims of nuclear weapons, and this we regard as a significant part of the “legal gap” that the Humanitarian Pledge group seeks to fill. We believe that a treaty banning nuclear weapons should contain obligations relating to the fulfillment of victims’ rights and the remediation of contaminated environments.

Secondly, I wish to highlight the potential educational role of the ban. If an agency is to be established for the purpose of promoting the full implementation and universalization of the treaty, we believe that it should also have a mandate to educate the global public about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use and testing of nuclear weapons – including in the Pacific.

Mr. Chairman,

This year marks two decades since the last of the nuclear test explosions in the Pacific. Though there have been some attempts to remediate the areas most heavily affected by radioactive contamination, it will never be possible to restore fully our precious islands to their former pristine state, nor to undo the harm inflicted upon our peoples over generations.

We can, however, work with other nations to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again, whether in testing programs or in warfare – and that is what
we are here to do. For the sake of present and future generations, we must free the world of the nuclear menace. Palau stands ready to join the proposed negotiating conference in 2017 on a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for a chance to address the floor.