ICAN Statement

UN Open-ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament

The pathway towards a ban on nuclear weapons

Delivered by Clara Levin
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I speak on behalf of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the founding partner of ICAN. We are under no illusion that the pathway forward will be an easy one. But we are convinced that real progress can – and must – be made in the months ahead. The consequence of continued inaction is potentially catastrophe. The nuclear-weapon-free states – who constitute the overwhelming majority – will be pivotal in driving us towards our destination.

Three years ago in Oslo, 128 states gathered for the first-ever conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. It was a dire warning against complacency – a wake-up call to humanity. International relief agencies advised that they would be utterly powerless to respond to the aftermath of even a single nuclear detonation – let alone a full-scale nuclear war.

A year later, in Nayarit, Mexico, 146 states gathered to carry forward this ground-breaking, fact-based discussion. And there, it became abundantly clear to all that the risk of a nuclear detonation today is as high as it has ever been – perhaps even higher.

At the end of 2014, 158 states gathered in Vienna for the third and final conference on this crucial topic. The main conclusion was: a legal gap exists in the current regime governing nuclear weapons, and must be filled without delay. In the year and a half since the Vienna conference, a large majority of states have pledged to work together to ban these ultimate weapons of mass destruction.

Here, in this working group, we have begun the important task of debating the elements to be included in the new treaty to fulfil this historic pledge. All but a small handful of states have participated actively in these fact-based discussions and pre-negotiations.

We regret the reference earlier today to the absence of, I quote, “important states” from this working group. All states are important. This pervasive notion that certain states, and peoples, are more equal than others is precisely why we have, for so long, failed to achieve our goal. It is why colonial powers considered it acceptable to detonate 300 nuclear weapons in the Pacific, as the delegate of Palau so eloquently reminded us.
Eliminating nuclear weapons is a task for all states. All states have a duty – and a right – to work together towards this goal. The push for a treaty banning nuclear weapons is motivated by a fervent desire to ensure that no one else ever suffers from these most despicable weapons. Over the past three years, states have laid the groundwork for a successful negotiating process.

There is no compelling reason to continue delaying the prohibition of a weapon that is inherently immoral and manifestly inhumane. We therefore warmly welcome the proposal to convene the first negotiating conference in 2017 for a legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons.

These negotiations must be open to all states. They must include the voices of civil society. And they must be blockable by none. They need not be overly complex and drawn-out. Other indiscriminate, inhumane weapons have already been banned through global treaties.

The provisions in those treaties – as well as in nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties – should provide useful guidance to states in drafting the text. It is time to get started. We have an historic opportunity to declare nuclear weapons illegal once and for all. Let us not squander it. Let us not wait for another Hiroshima or Nagasaki – or a calamity of even greater proportions – before we finally muster the political will to act.

Thank you.