Statement by Global Zero on Confronting Catastrophic Nuclear Risks

As delivered 12 May 2016 by Derek Johnson, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the international Global Zero movement for the elimination of all nuclear weapons, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion.

The terrible prospect that nuclear weapons will be used lies at the heart of this group’s mandate.

As we discussed this morning, we have clearly established that the risks are significantly greater than previously understood and are in fact growing all over the world. It is precisely this danger that lends urgency to the humanitarian initiative, and crystallizes the need to focus on immediate measures that can reduce the likelihood of this nightmare scenario.

While we deliberate here today, all of the nuclear-armed states are marching to upgrade, expand or operationalize their arsenals. As that march progresses, the role of nuclear weapons in their national security policies will expand and the risks that they will be used — by accident, by unauthorized action, by mistaken launch on false warning, by deliberate decisions stemming from crisis or conflict escalation, or by terrorists who acquire them — will increase, especially in light of rising regional tensions among these states and their close allies.

Perversely, all of these risks are being run in the name of deterrence and security. But deterrence cannot prevent the unintended use of nuclear weapons, and in fact may not prevent intentional use. Its core premise is to threaten, at all times, the use of nuclear weapons. That is not security. This construct could fail — catastrophically — at any time.

Global Zero has been actively contributing to this humanitarian discourse — and advocating in the halls of power within the nuclear-armed states — by providing expert testimony on plausible, credible scenarios of nuclear weapons use and on interim measures that should be taken to minimize these possibilities. They are presented in the Global Zero Commission Report on Nuclear Risk Reduction and summarized in our working paper NGO/27, which I encourage you to review.

These recommendations, such as de-alerting, have been formulated and vetted by former senior government officials, national security advisors and top military commanders from the very states who must implement them.
They are practical, they are aggressive, and — most critically — they are ideas that resonate with elements of these governments, governments whose positions are not so monolithic as they seem. These measures would also reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the security policies of the nuclear-armed states, strip them of value in the eyes of military planners, make them more vulnerable to disarmament negotiations, and accelerate their complete dismantlement.

The only way to completely eliminate the risk is to totally eliminate the weapons. Everyone here understands that. And we all know that that future, though achievable, is not within our immediate reach. It will take many years. But the overwhelming evidence forces the conclusion that we cannot abide the risks for years — that we must exert all of our energies to halt and reverse these trends, now.

Thus the agenda of this group must include a strategy of intense pressure for the adoption of interim measures to reduce the catastrophic risk of nuclear weapons use — measures that may buy us a little more time while simultaneously moving us closer to our ultimate objective of a world without nuclear weapons.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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