Statement by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

Open-ended working group on “taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations”

Geneva, 15 May 2013

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

I am speaking on behalf of ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

The use of a nuclear weapon on a major populated area would immediately kill tens if not hundreds of thousands of people – mothers, fathers and children.

Hundreds of thousands more would be alive – but injured. Blinded, burned and crushed.

The immediate effects of just a single nuclear weapon are shocking and overwhelming enough. They go far beyond what can be considered acceptable.

The blinding flash leaves people sightless – although blinding weapons have been outlawed.

The massive blast will levels cities – although carpet bombing with conventional explosive weapons has been outlawed.

The searing heat and spreading fires will melt steel, engulf homes and can coalesce into a firestorm that will suck the air from anyone still breathing – though incendiary weapons are outlawed from use in urban areas.

And the survivors of these effects may yet be poisoned by radioactive fallout – that breaks down their bodies over the days and weeks that follow – though the use of poison has been outlawed in war.

That nuclear weapons have not already been clearly declared illegal – to sit, outdated, alongside the other weapons of mass destruction – is a failure of our collective social responsibility.
When the ICRC, UNDP, OCHA and other major aid agencies told us in Oslo that they would not be able to provide meaningful assistance in the event of nuclear catastrophe, we have to understand what this means.

We have a chance to act now, because if the bombs are detonated it will be too late.

The consequences would be global, long term and truly catastrophic for human health, our environment, our development, security, human rights and food resources, with the most vulnerable people and regions suffering the greatest harm.

This makes nuclear weapons a threat that has to be prevented by everyone. This is not just something that can be left to the states that wield these weapons, as they seem to be in denial.

As governments, you are responsible for the safety and security of your citizens. Many countries have taken important steps to make your regions into nuclear-weapon free zones. But if one or more of the nuclear-armed states makes a mistake or gets it wrong, people in all our countries could suffer terrible consequences, wherever we live.

This is what needs to be the basis of the work of this open-ended working group. We hope that all states here will continue to think deeply and constructively about what is possible, necessary and achievable to prevent further unacceptable humanitarian harm from these weapons of mass suffering.