Civil society and the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons
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Nayarit, Mexico

On behalf of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), I would like to thank the Mexican government for hosting us here in Nayarit, and we’ve appreciated the close cooperation with the Mexican foreign ministry in order to facilitate civil society participation. I’m really happy that we have about 120 civil society participants here today, representing over 60 different organizations from more than 50 countries. People have travelled from places like Togo, Nepal, Fiji and many other places far away to be here today and to take part of this conference.

While civil society has always highlighted the catastrophic impact that any use of nuclear weapons would have, since 2010 we have increasingly made it our main focus. We’ve realized that any discussion on what to do about nuclear weapons must be based on the impact their use would have on human beings.

While a discussion around the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons is not new in itself, most previous efforts around these weapons have been preoccupied with political and national security concerns, rather than the effects. Despite commitments to nuclear disarmament, the nuclear-armed states cling on to their arsenals professing a need to deter attacks from perceived enemies in a complex, unsettled global security environment, and treating them as symbol of power and prestige.

Such discussion makes it difficult and disempowering for civil society to advocate for nuclear disarmament. This is a huge problem, not just for us, it is also a problem for governments and for the international community as a whole. Civil society engagement is not only important for progress on multilateral negotiations, it is essential. Whether or not you agree with us, without campaigns, media, experts and other elements that we in civil society bring with us, governments will struggle to make progress on difficult issues that requires compromise and negotiations. If you are ever going to get rid of nuclear weapons, you need civil society. And you will need a strong and effective civil society.

This recent focus on the humanitarian impact has provided ICAN with that unique opportunity to mobilize and become a stronger and more effective campaign.

First, a humanitarian focus breaks up the stalemate of Cold War style discussions on nuclear weapons. It’s no longer a technical security focused discussion for only arms control wonks in Washington, Paris or New Delhi. It is a topic of relevance for a broader constituency, a wider network of policy and opinion makers. It has involved a new type of actors, humanitarian actors like the ICRC, UN humanitarian agencies, and civil society actors working in the field. It has managed to broaden the interest in nuclear disarmament, from mainly consisting of the traditional peace movement, to now involve a broader spectrum of political views, based on humanitarian principles. Few actors, be it political leaders, policy-makers, parliamentarians, civil society organisations wish to be seen as acting in contradiction with these principles.

Second, it contains a very effective way to raise awareness. Talking about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons makes everyone react. Talking about the blast, fires, and radiation, on the amount of blood transfusions needed, amount of burn beds lacking, or simple logistical questions about what to do with 50,000 bodies makes people aware of what these weapons are. Talking about what nuclear weapons would do to you, your city, or any city in the world makes people want to act.

Third and finally, it places responsibility on everyone. It highlights nuclear weapons as a global humanitarian problem that we all share a responsibility to solve. Much like climate change or international organized crime, the impact of any use of nuclear weapons could spread beyond
borders, far away from the original incident. A nuclear detonation in densely populated areas would cause huge pressure on migration flows in neighboring countries. An accident with a nuclear warhead in transfer would overwhelm any disaster management ability of the unfortunate state that would be affected. A nuclear war could cause significant reduction in crops like corn and rice, and would severely affect already vulnerable regions that lack food. A humanitarian perspective means that we all have a responsibility to act to prevent nuclear weapons from being used. Any state, from any region, small or large, has not only an equal right to talk about the impact of nuclear weapons as the nine nuclear armed states, but they have an obligation to do so in order to protect their people.

And I think that the fact that over 140 states are here today, together with numerous international organisations, academic institutes, and civil society organisations, shows that the international community is starting to assume responsibility for this issue.

So, with this humanitarian focus at the center of our work, ICAN has grown in the last year to now include over 350 partner organisations in over 90 states. And since Oslo, we've been quite busy.

We've engaged in a huge range of activities, from street actions to parliamentarian hearings, we've organized round tables in pretty much every region of the world, we've delivered speeches, written op-eds, done interviews, organized big conferences, produced research, reports, carried out advocacy in multilateral disarmament forums, and many other things.

And our campaigning is having an impact. We're getting foreign ministers to respond to our questions, we've met with presidents, we're getting 125 governments to sign up to humanitarian statements, and a growing number of states to call for a ban on nuclear weapons. When we speak, you listen.

Simply recognizing and raising concerns about huge humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons isn't enough for us. There is a clear and simple argument that can be set out from this discourse; nuclear weapons have unacceptable effects and we must prevent them from ever being used. Prevention requires that they be prohibited in the same way as other unacceptable weapons have been, biological weapons, chemical weapons, landmines, and cluster munitions.

We are confident that the facts presented in Oslo, and those that will be presented here in Nayarit will provide us with the knowledge base we need for moving forward to political solutions. Nuclear weapons were created with the purpose of not distinguishing between civilians and military target, to wipe out entire cities, to kill tens of thousands of people in just a few seconds with one single detonation. How can we allow them to remain legal?

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons will continue this discussion beyond Nayarit. We will continue to grow. We will continue to get new civil society organisations to join our campaign. We will work with parliamentarians, with media, with the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and with you all. We are going to turn up the heat of this campaign even more, and build up the momentum in the coming months. The time to negotiate a ban has come now.