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Civil Society Initiatives: What Will It Take?

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Distinguished delegates,

Here in this hall, you speak not as individuals, but on behalf of nations. You speak as representatives of your citizens. Yet, in most cases, the statements you deliver fail to convey the public’s overwhelming desire for urgent, united action to eradicate nuclear arms. And, very often, they conceal the alarming reality that nations continue to invest heavily in their nuclear arsenals at the expense of human security, that after decades of talks we remain just a hair’s-breadth from unparalleled catastrophe.

Distinguished delegates,

When will nuclear-armed nations and their allies accept what has long been obvious to ordinary people everywhere – that banning the bomb is not an option, but an urgent necessity; that business as usual is unsustainable? Three in four nations now accept that the time has come to negotiate a nuclear weapons ban. We implore each of you: Do not wait the incineration of a city; do not await a plume of radioactive fallout that spans the hemispheres; do not await a humanitarian and environmental disaster of unprecedented proportions – before finally mustering the will to eliminate man's most evil creation.

Governments have a clear popular mandate to act. For sixty-seven years, people everywhere have mobilized against the bomb, demanding an end to the insanity of threatening to annihilate entire nations. Yet, although polls show that support for a nuclear-weapon-free world has never been stronger, we see little action to abolish these monstrous devices. Instead, we see billions of dollars, pounds, euros, yuan, and rubles being squandered on the modernization of nuclear forces, diverting public wealth away from meeting human needs. When will this stop?

Distinguished delegates,

Since we last addressed this forum in New York two years ago, civil society has continued to mobilize for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons, rejecting, as ever, the apocalyptic tendencies of certain governments. One notable development was the adoption last November of a landmark resolution by Red Cross and Red Crescent societies that urged states to negotiate an international agreement to prohibit and eliminate nuclear arms. As the world’s largest humanitarian organization, with close to 100 million staff and volunteers globally, and a long history of neutrality and political independence, the Red Cross is well placed to use humanitarian diplomacy to help bring the nuclear weapons era to an end.

Other groups have drawn attention to the fundamental incompatibility of nuclear weapons with international law. In March of last year the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms and The Simons Foundation released the Vancouver...
Declaration, “Law’s Imperative for the Urgent Achievement of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World”, signed by numerous eminent experts in law and diplomacy. The declaration holds that it cannot be lawful to continue indefinitely to possess weapons which are unlawful to use or threaten to use, are already banned for most states, and are subject to an obligation of elimination.

Through the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Global Zero, Abolition 2000, and other campaigns and networks, people are re-orienting themselves, uniting under a common theme – under the right type of umbrella – to achieve together what could not be achieved alone, to create an unstoppable, irresistible groundswell of public support for a universal ban on nuclear weapons. In Canada, more than 600 prominent citizens, among them Nobel laureates and renowned physicians, have petitioned the government to initiate negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention. A similar appeal in Australia garnered the support of past prime ministers, governors-general, military chiefs, actors, artists, authors, scientists, businesspeople and sporting legends.

In the nuclear-armed states, disarmament campaigners continue to challenge costly nuclear weapons modernization programmes, which run counter to the universal obligation to pursue and achieve nuclear abolition. In the United States – which spends more on its nuclear forces than all other nations combined – legal and political battles are under way to thwart construction of three new nuclear bomb factories. Dozens of protesters, some of them elderly, have been arrested and imprisoned for their courageous efforts to close down nuclear facilities and prevent deployment and testing of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. And there are signs that a new and powerful student-led movement to ban the bomb is emerging.

In Britain, disarmament advocates have ramped up efforts to stop government plans to replace the nation’s ageing fleet of nuclear-armed submarines – and redirect public funds towards education, health care and jobs. French campaigners have held hunger strikes to put pressure on their government to disarm. And right across Europe, activists are demanding the withdrawal, at long last, of US battlefield nuclear arms from the continent – a dangerous legacy of the cold war. Their efforts are part of a broader campaign, encompassing Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea, to end allied support for the expansive US nuclear war-fighting apparatus.

In South Asia, Indian and Pakistani campaigners have been working tirelessly to halt the potentially catastrophic nuclear arms race under way between their nations. And in the Middle East, as tensions escalate over Iran’s disputed nuclear programme and Israel’s undeclared arsenal, peace and disarmament advocates are uniting to demand dialogue and denounce military action. Activists from the Israeli Disarmament Movement have demonstrated in the streets to voice their support for a diplomatic resolution, and the Japanese Peace Boat has provided a neutral venue for discussions on pathways to a nuclear-weapon-free world. Dozens of groups in Japan continue their campaign for prompt negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention.

Distinguished delegates,

We recognize that governments do not act alone in their preparations for nuclear war. Very often, they provide contracts to private companies to modernize warheads and build the missiles and submarines to deliver them. A vast global web of banks, pension funds and insurance companies finance these nuclear arms makers. In March, ICAN launched a major report that identified the institutions most heavily involved, and called on them to divest. This initiative builds on the successes of the Occupy movement, which has so stunningly drawn the world’s attention to the vices
of corporate greed. There should be no doubt that the principal beneficiaries of governments’ continuing refusal to disarm are the chief executives of arms manufacturers.

Distinguished delegates,

Let me turn now to the other nuclear threat: nuclear power. In Japan, as elsewhere, organizations have combined their call for nuclear disarmament with an unequivocal denunciation of atomic energy. The earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan’s north-eastern shores last March were natural phenomena that no one could have prevented or controlled. But the triple nuclear meltdown at Fukushima was a man-made disaster – easily foreseen, easily averted. Today, 150,000 Japanese citizens are nuclear refugees. Many thousands more are living in dangerously radioactive areas. The full toll of this great tragedy, on human health and the environment, will not be known for decades.

In response to the disaster, the Japanese people have risen up and demanded an end to the dirty, dangerous nuclear industry, proposing safe, renewable energy alternatives. Hundreds of thousands have marched through the streets; tens of thousands have participated in anti-nuclear conferences. Today, in large part because of their efforts, just one of the nation’s 54 reactors is online.

The Japanese have not been alone in rejecting nuclear power. The German public last year forced their government to commit to shutting down its nuclear reactors. Thousands of campaigners formed human chains, kilometres long, that linked the power plants. Similar protests have taken place in France and elsewhere across Europe. Italians voted resoundingly against nuclear power in a referendum, and just over a month ago, at a conference in Mali on uranium mining, activists from around Africa declared, in no uncertain terms, that the future is renewable, not radioactive.

Distinguished delegates,

For those in this room representing governments that believe they have a right to possess and threaten to use nuclear weapons at their will, for those in this room who believe that their nation’s security is enhanced through its support for an ally’s nuclear weapons programme, for those in this room who think that acquiring the bomb might bring them security, for this in this room who refuse to see the nexus between nuclear weapons and nuclear power – let there be no mistake: the people of the world are against you. The people’s verdict is clear: abolish nuclear weapons now. End this madness once and for all.

Disarmament is not an optional extra of the NPT. It is your legal duty. It is your moral responsibility. It is the loud, urgent, persistent plea of people across the globe. Help us make this the new and better reality. We owe it to the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia and the Sahara, of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima, and of other irradiated lands, to do everything in our power to ensure that they are the last, that no one else shall ever suffer as they have suffered. So, distinguished delegates, what will it take? What will it take to ensure that the nuclear era ends, not in cities smouldering, but in worldwide celebration?

Thank you.