Statement of the International Committee of the Red Cross
to the
2013 session of the NPT Preparatory Committee

In 2010, the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) took a ground-breaking step in recognizing the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and the relevance of international humanitarian law in this regard. This step has inspired a renewed focus on the horrific human suffering that would result from the use of nuclear weapons and the implications of such weapons on the environment.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) welcomes this development. In our view, an informed view on these weapons must include a detailed grasp of the immediate consequences of nuclear weapons on human health and on medical and other infrastructure. Equally important is an understanding of the longer-term effects on health and the implications for the world’s climate and food production. Recent studies by the ICRC, IPPNW and other organizations have highlighted these implications.

It was a deep and profound concern about these consequences that led the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to make a historic appeal on nuclear weapons in 2011. In it, the Movement called on States to ensure that nuclear weapons are never again used, regardless of their views on the legality of such weapons, and to pursue in good faith and determination negotiations to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons through a legally binding international agreement, based on existing commitments and international obligations.

The appeal of the Movement was also based on the direct experience of the ICRC and the Japanese Red Cross in responding to and treating the survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In those cities, the Red Cross came face-to-face with the use of nuclear weapons and its impact on civilians, medical care and medical infrastructure. Tens of thousands of people were dead and many more dying from their injuries. The extensive destruction and damage to hospitals and medical infrastructure meant that there was little or no health-care capacity in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. In addition, little could be done for the many thousands who died later from leukaemia, cancers and other ailments caused by radiation exposure.

The Final Declaration of the 2010 Review Conference reaffirms the unequivocal undertaking of nuclear weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament. The discussion on the humanitarian consequences has reinforced the need to eliminate these weapons as a matter of urgency. The 2015 Review Conference is a unique opportunity for NPT States to lead on this issue and we encourage NPT States to seize it. As the ICRC President Peter Maurer said in his statement to the Oslo Conference on the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons in March 2013, “The international community has not always seized upon opportunities to prevent human suffering. In the case of nuclear weapons, prevention – including the development of a legally binding treaty to prohibit and eliminate such weapons – is the only way forward.” Indeed, the elimination of nuclear weapons is a goal already called for in Article 6 of the NPT.