First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the 2020 Review Conference
of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

Statement of the International Committee of the Red Cross

In 2010, the State Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) expressed their deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and reaffirmed the need for all States to comply with international humanitarian law. The Acton Plan adopted that same year also identified concrete steps for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and measures to advance towards a nuclear weapon free world. The 2020 NPT Review Conference is a critical opportunity for States Parties to assess the progress they have made in these areas and to consider further steps towards achieving these goals.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, and the broader International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, have since 1945 been calling for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.

In 2011, we appealed to all States to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again and to prohibit their use and completely eliminate them through a legally binding international agreement, based on existing commitments and international obligations. Such commitments and obligations include those in Article VI of the NPT and in NPT Action Plans.

Today, the increasing risk of intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons use makes it even more urgent to fulfil NPT obligations and commitments. Eminent security and military experts have concluded that the risk of use of nuclear weapons has now reached levels not seen since the Cold War. There is growing distrust among several major military powers that possess nuclear weapons. Tensions and acts of provocation are increasing in some regions of the world. These factors raise serious concern that escalation and miscalculation may lead to the intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons.

The cyber threats to nuclear control can also not be ignored.

These facts and the current state of affairs are profoundly disturbing. The ICRC urges NPT States Parties to make concrete progress on their nuclear disarmament obligations under the treaty (Article VI) by the 2020 Review Conference and to implement long-standing risk reduction commitments as a matter urgency.

In the view of the ICRC, there are three practical steps in particular that NPT States Parties must take to reduce nuclear risks, deriving from existing commitments:

Firstly, as outlined in the 2010 Action Plan (Action 5f), nuclear-weapon States are called on to take steps to reduce the risk of accidental use of nuclear weapons. This involves taking nuclear weapons off “hair trigger” alert. Promoting the de-alerting of nuclear weapons should be a high priority for all States.

Secondly, nuclear-weapon States must implement their commitment (Action 5c), to diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in national security postures. Progressively reducing this role
will not only reduce the risk of accidental or intentional use, it will decrease military reliance on nuclear weapons and help to create the conditions for their elimination. Yet reports that some States are massively investing in modernizing their nuclear weapon arsenals seem at odds with these commitments.

Thirdly, in light of the history of false warnings and miscalculation involving nuclear weapons, and against the backdrop of today’s complex security environment, we urge nuclear-weapon States to agree concrete confidence-building measures aimed at reducing the chances of a deliberate or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. Such measures have long been on the international agenda. They are crucial to reduce risks and must be accorded greater urgency.

Ultimately, the only way to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again is to prohibit and eliminate them. The ICRC therefore urges all States to participate in the negotiation of a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons, currently underway in the framework of the UN General Assembly. In our view, such a treaty is an essential step to “create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons”, as resolved by the 2009 Summit of the UN Security Council. It would also be a concrete step towards fulfilling the obligation “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures” relating to nuclear disarmament, as required under Article VI of the NPT.

For those States not yet ready to join the negotiation of the nuclear weapon ban treaty, we call on them to urgently fulfil their risk reduction commitments. Risk reduction is an intermediate step that nuclear-armed States and their allies can and must pursue, pending the fulfilment of nuclear disarmament obligations. Action must be taken now. The risks are too high, the dangers too real.

Thank you.