Address by Sue Coleman-Haseldine to nuclear weapons ban treaty negotiating conference, UN New York, 27 March 2017

My name is Sue Coleman-Haseldine. I was born in 1951 on Koonibba Mission. I was a small child when the British and Australian governments tested nuclear weapons in the South Australian desert near my birthplace.

For over a decade full nuclear explosions and hundreds of experiments dispersed plutonium and other weapons materials, contaminating almost all of Australia.

Aboriginal people were still living close to the test sites and were told nothing about radiation. Some communities were so contaminated that most people developed acute radiation sickness. High rates of cancer were eventually documented in the 16,000 test workers, but no studies were done of Aboriginal people and others living in areas of fallout, many of whom were even more highly exposed.

High rates of cancer and chronic illness haunt my family and our wider community. My small town of Ceduna is being called the Cancer Capital of Australia. I worry about animals and plants, which are also harmed by radiation. They can’t speak for themselves and are ignored and left to die.

Today the Australian and South Australian governments are again proposing nuclear waste dumps for South Australia, as if having been poisoned once its somehow OK for us and our lands to be radioactively sacrificed again. The language and rationale being used today is very similar to that of the 1950s – “desolate”, “unused lands” being used in the “national interest”. We won’t accept this, not for us, not for the broader community. We know from bitter experience that nuclear materials and weapons can never be safe. Aboriginal people have the oldest living culture on the planet and have cared for these lands continuously. Despite attempts to annihilate, assimilate and suppress us, we remain committed to looking after our people, cultural knowledge, lands and waters.

Though we live in remote Australia, we now know that everywhere they have been used worldwide, nuclear weapons have devastated people
and their lands. Together, we need to connect the past, present and future; and work towards a treaty to ban all nuclear weapons, so there will be no new victims under a mushroom cloud.

A nuclear ban treaty is also an opportunity to assist countries to make amends to victims of nuclear weapons. The treaty should acknowledge the permanent damage done to people, land and culture, across generations, and particularly for indigenous people worldwide. It should require countries to address the needs of impacted people.

I am speaking to you today in the hope that by working together, life on Earth can continue into a safe, nuclear-free future. A nuclear weapons ban treaty is a crucial step on the path to that future becoming a reality, as it must.

I know that the future is not ours; it will, forever, belong to the next generation.

Thank you for listening to me.