REPORT FROM THE CONFERENCE ON THE
HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF NUCLEAR
WEAPONS
Oslo, Norway
4-5 March 2013

Reaching Critical Will | A programme of the
Women’s International League for Peace and
Freedom

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Reaching Critical Will is the disarmament pro-
gramme of the Women’s International League for
Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women’s
peace organization in the world. Reaching Critical
Will works for nuclear and conventional disarma-
ment, the reduction of global military spending,
and the demilitarization of politics and econom-
ics in order to achieve human security and social,
economic, and environmental justice.

Cover photo: Alexander Harang
MOVING TOWARDS A BAN ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS
Beatrice Fihn and Ray Acheson

On 4–5 March 2013, the Norwegian government hosted a conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Oslo during which governments, UN agencies, international organisations, and civil society analysed the effects of the use of nuclear weapons on human health, the environment, economies, development, and more. The discussion was instrumental in reframing the discourse around nuclear weapons, focusing on the direct humanitarian consequences of their use rather than on myths of their alleged value for state “security”.

The key conclusions from the conference, highlighted by Norway’s Foreign Minister in his closing summary, were that no state or international body could adequately address the humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapon detonation; that nuclear weapons have demonstrated devastating immediate and long-term effects; and that such effects will not be constrained by national borders, and will have regional and global impacts. At the end of the conference, the government of Mexico announced that it will hold a follow-up meeting to continue this discussion.

This conference was the first time that governments have come together to seriously address the catastrophic humanitarian impact caused by the use of nuclear weapons. It also marked a significant change in perspective for many non-nuclear weapon states, which recognise that the current discourse on nuclear weapons has been insufficient to address the grave threats they pose to human existence and that the challenge posed by nuclear weapons to human and planetary survival must be addressed through preventative measures.

The discussion following each expert panel was surprisingly different from debates in the usual disarmament fora, such as nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) meetings, the UN General Assembly, and the Conference on Disarmament (CD). The discussion remained focused on the weapons themselves and avoided to a large extent the recycled rhetoric that polarizes typical nuclear weapons debates. Instead, the conference actually managed to move the agenda forward where many arms control and reduction initiatives have failed, by adding a new and refreshing dimension to the international discussion.

Another encouraging aspect of this conference was the key role played by international organisations and civil society. As NGO representatives working on nuclear weapons issues, it is very uncommon to be able to ask for the floor. But the interventions by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and other international organisations and NGOs brought a dynamic dimension to the proceedings and should be a precedent for any upcoming nuclear weapons discussions.

Only two of the nuclear possessing states, India and Pakistan, attended the meeting. The other countries with nuclear weapons—China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, France, Israel, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States—did not participate. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council boycotted the meeting, saying that the conference would “divert discussion and focus” away from other fora. The same day as the conference was held, the UK ambassador to the CD said that “all efforts should be focused on getting the CD back to work” and the Russian ambassador argued that
127 states participated in the Oslo conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chile, Colombia, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Cote d’Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Guinea Bissau, Holy See, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Latvia, Liberia, Libya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, FYR Macedonia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Sao Tome and Principe, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Swaziland, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe

the Oslo conference might “pull apart the CD agenda”. China’s ambassador warned that discussions external to the CD or UN system would undermine existing processes, while the US ambassador emphasised the need for a “practical, step-by-step approach to disarmament.” These arguments do not make sense. The CD has failed for more than 15 years to even adopt a programme of work, let alone engage in substantive work. The notion that addressing the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons could undermine any work on disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons is illogical. By any definition, nuclear weapons would be classed as inhumane, triggering both humanitarian and environmental disasters. Therefore, focusing on the humanitarian consequences challenges the foundation of maintaining nuclear weapons and undermines any incentives for proliferation, something that should be in the interest of all states around the world.

In addition, it is worth highlighting that the nuclear weapon possessing countries engage in “alternative” process outside of the UN or CD frameworks all the time in order to address their non-proliferation concerns, such as through the Nuclear Security Summit or the Proliferation Security Initiative, among others. Yet no one accuses these processes of undermining the NPT or other existing processes.

In fact, addressing the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons is complementary with efforts to implement the 2010 NPT outcome document, in which all NPT states parties expressed their “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” and reaffirmed “the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law.”

The PS missed an opportunity for dialogue in Oslo, but it did not stop countries and international organisations from moving forward. On the contrary, Mexico’s decision to host a further meeting on this issue was welcomed in all closing statements and received much appreciation by civil society representatives present in the room and around the world. Norway and Mexico’s initiative on this issue recognises that nuclear weapon free countries have an important role to play. The follow-up meeting is a key opportunity for all states, international organisations, and civil society to continue this discussion and to “deal decisively with nuclear weapons,” as the representative from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said.

In the end, the conference was important not only because it provided the space needed to reframe the discourse around nuclear weapons, but also because it was a significant first move towards negotiations of a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

Photo by Xanthe Hall/IPPNW
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE
Ray Acheson

Full presentations from speakers and many interventions made from the floor are available online at www.reachingcriticalwill.org. The following are some of the brief highlights from the conference:

• The UN agencies addressing the conference were very clear that they would not be able to effectively respond to the humanitarian and environmental catastrophe that would be created by the use of nuclear weapons.

• Likewise, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emphasized that there is no capacity to respond to such a disaster nor could such a capacity be developed. Thus the ICRC called for the abolition of nuclear weapons as the only effective preventative measure.

• Speakers addressing the scientific, human health, environmental, economic, developmental effects of nuclear weapons emphasized how horrific the consequences of the use of these weapons would be, drawing on simulated studies, records from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and evidence from Chernobyl and Fukushima.

• In its four interventions and opening video statement, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) highlighted the devastation caused by the use of nuclear weapons and called for a ban to outlaw them once and for all. ICAN's representatives noted that the fact that nuclear weapons are not already illegal is a failure of our collective social responsibility.

• Dozens of government participants agreed the consequences would be devastating and/or that they could never effectively prepare for a nuclear detonation, including Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Iran, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and Zambia.

• Many countries emphasized that elimination of nuclear weapons is the only way to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, including Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela.

• In keeping with that conclusion, several countries called for a ban on nuclear weapons, including Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Iran, Jamaica, Jordan, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, and Zambia.

• Several countries criticized the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines, such as Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka.

• Some participants criticized modernization of nuclear weapons and continued spending on their maintenance, including Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Iran, Mozambique, and Nicaragua.

• Chile, Costa Rica, Iran, and Mozambique, along with the ICRC, said the use of nuclear weapons would violate international humanitarian law.

• Many countries called for a follow-up to the conference and/or welcomed Mexico’s announcement that it would host another meeting on this subject, including Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Iran, Ireland, Jordan, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, and Turkey.

Statements and presentations from governments, international organisations, and civil society are available at

www.reachingcriticalwill.org

A full list of participants and official programme from the conference are also available online.
ICAN CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

For two days before the international meeting hosted by the government of Norway on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) convened a Civil Society Forum. The Forum brought together other 400 activists from 70 countries to discuss how we can finally get rid of the impending humanitarian disaster that is nuclear weapons.

Participants heard from scientists, activists, and academics, as well as victims of nuclear detonations. A full programme is available at www.goodbyenuk.es/programme. They learned everything from how a nuclear weapon works to how we, as civil society, can help change the world through banning nuclear weapons.

Side events and exhibitions in the market place, as well as guest appearances by Martin Sheen and Reverend John Dear, rounded out an amazing two days of education and fun. The Civil Society Forum provided inspiration to campaigners from around the world to continue working to Ban the Bomb.

A full report from the Civil Society Forum will be forthcoming from ICAN.

www.icanw.org
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Unspeakable suffering: the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons
Published by Reaching Critical Will, a programme of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom
Available at www.reachingcriticalwill.org

Banning nuclear weapons
Published by Article 36
Available at www.article36.org

Catastrophic humanitarian harm
Published by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)
Available at www.icanw.org

Humanitarian impacts from a single nuclear weapons detonation on Manchester
Published by Article 36
Available at www.article36.org
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