International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) statement to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

9 December 2014, Vienna

I am speaking on behalf of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, a coalition of over 360 organisations in more than 90 countries. We are a global campaign determined to achieve the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. We organised the weekend forum for over 600 people on the courage to ban nuclear weapons.

The conferences on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons hosted by Norway, Mexico, and now Austria have clearly explained and documented these impacts. We have heard alarming evidence about the devastating effects of nuclear weapons. We have heard about the risks of detonation, either accidental or intentional. We have heard that no effective response is possible.

We have also heard the stories of people that have survived the use or testing of nuclear weapons. Their stories illustrate that nuclear weapons are unacceptable and should clearly therefore be prohibited. But these stories also illustrate the need for legal provisions to assist victims and to ensure the fulfilment of their rights.

What stands out from the session on legal frameworks is that we are currently lacking an instrument that explicitly characterises nuclear weapons as unacceptable under international law. Our next step as supporters of the humanitarian initiative should be to explore the best way to address this legal deficit.

The chair of the Nayarit conference concluded that, in light of the devastating immediate and long-term effects of nuclear detonations, the time has come to start a diplomatic process to negotiate a legally-binding instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons.

This is not a radical proposal. Indiscriminate weapons get banned. We have done it before with other weapon systems, including biological and chemical weapons.

This should not be a controversial proposal. An international prohibition is the logical outcome of an examination of the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons detonation. A new legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons would constitute a long overdue implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This is a meaningful proposal. It would establish a comprehensive set of prohibitions and provide a framework under which the elimination of nuclear weapons can be pursued.

This is a feasible, achievable proposal. It can be negotiated now, and have normative and practical impacts.

We have heard some say that the calls for a new legal regime on nuclear weapons fail to take into account security interests. But, as New Zealand said, those countries must explain what they mean. Whose security are they talking about?

Where such a treaty is negotiated is less important than ensuring that the process is open to all and blockable by none. That includes the nuclear-armed states. It would be better for all states to participate. But this seems unlikely at the present time. While we must keep working towards that goal with absolute
determination, we believe states should put a prohibition in place now. The 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks is the appropriate milestone to launch such a process.

This will take courage. We have confidence that the overwhelming majority of states will join this process. And we look forward to accompanying you along the road to a treaty banning nuclear weapons.