

Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty Negotiations Begin at the United Nations

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CONTACT

David Solimini
david@icanw.org
US: [757-876-0295](tel:757-876-0295)

On Monday, negotiations on a treaty to ban nuclear weapons in international law began in New York. The treaty is being negotiated based on the recognition that the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons use is morally unacceptable and that the weapons themselves represent a clear danger to human security.

As the conference opened, **ICAN Executive Director Beatrice Fihn said, “The treaty will finally ban weapons designed to indiscriminately kill civilians, completing the prohibitions on weapons of mass destruction.”**

With the support of more than 120 countries, the UN General Assembly approved the negotiation of a treaty banning nuclear weapons in October of 2016. The UN action followed a series of fact-finding conferences on the unacceptable humanitarian cost of any nuclear weapons use and the role a prohibition on nuclear weapons would have in strengthening international humanitarian law. It was the conclusion of the General Assembly that every state has security interest in preventing nuclear weapons use.

It is expected that the treaty will legally bind parties from using, possessing, and developing nuclear weapons, and assisting others in those activities. It is expected to work in concert with the existing regime of nonproliferation and disarmament agreements, strengthening the norm against indiscriminate weapons and providing countries a method to meet disarmament obligations.

“The treaty will have an impact, even on countries which fail to participate, by setting international norms of behavior and removing the political prestige associated with nuclear weapons,” Fihn added.

With the risk of nuclear detonation higher than at any time since the end of the Cold War, this treaty is an urgent priority for all countries that believe in a future free of nuclear weapons. Past disarmament efforts demonstrate that the most effective step towards the elimination of a class of weapons is prohibiting them under international law. The complete elimination of nuclear weapons by the states that possess them will not happen immediately, but the increasingly complex international security environment and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction highlights the need to bring an end to the nuclear age.

About ICAN. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is a global campaign coalition working to mobilize people in all countries to inspire, persuade and pressure their governments to prohibit nuclear weapons.

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Background: the Nuclear Ban Treaty

Overview

What’s new: This is the first time a nuclear disarmament treaty has ever been negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations.

Impact: A treaty banning nuclear weapons would do just that: Make using, possessing, developing, and assisting with nuclear weapons illegal under international law while providing a framework for the weapons’ eventual complete elimination. Nuclear weapons use will have unacceptable humanitarian consequences.

Banning these weapons is the next step in a decades-long effort to ensure that the laws of war are followed and the indiscriminate destruction caused by nuclear weapons is prevented forever.

Process: The negotiations will take place in two sessions, one week in March and three weeks in June/July of 2017 at the United Nations headquarters in New York. This week, representatives will meet to begin the drafting process by discussing and submitting language for the various components of the treaty. Between the two meetings, draft text will be produced for negotiation at the June/July meeting.

Old Dangers and Modern Threats

Nuclear weapons are part of the past, do not provide security, and pose a growing danger. Nuclear weapons are 1940s technology, invented for a different time. The world is facing threats and challenges — cybersecurity, pandemic disease, and terrorism — that can not be addressed by nuclear weapons or the logic of nuclear deterrence. The world has changed, yet we remain invested in nuclear weapons. More ominously, the spread of nuclear weapons, technology, and material only increases the chance of intentional or accidental nuclear detonation by states or terrorist groups.

Nuclear weapons pose a security threat to every country, not just nuclear states. Nuclear use would have a significant effect on many countries, well beyond the warring parties. The impact of weapons use on the global economy would be significant. The health of millions — especially children — would be profoundly affected by radioactive fallout which would quickly spread across regions and continents.

Unacceptable humanitarian cost and moral progress

The world has already decided that the indiscriminate killing of civilians is unacceptable. It is not possible to use nuclear weapons in a way that distinguishes between civilians and combatants. This is a clear violation of the laws of war/international humanitarian law.

Weapons have been banned for humanitarian reasons before. Biological (1972) and chemical (1992) weapons of mass destruction have been banned. More recently, the international community banned other indiscriminate weapons: landmines (1997) and cluster munitions (2008).

The treaty will hasten a nuclear weapons-free world.

The impact is real. Even without the participation of nuclear states, the ban treaty will have a powerful impact. Treaties often change the behavior of non party states, including WMD bans and Law of the Sea.

Reinforce norms and raise costs. A treaty will delegitimize the possession of these weapons, discourage their spread, and reinforce norms against ownership and testing nuclear weapons.