

ADVANCING THE TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

AFRICAN STATES LEADING THE PROCESS

Nuclear weapons represent “common security threats facing Africa”, as characterised in the 2004 African Union (AU) Common African Defense and Security Policy.¹ African nations played a leading role in the negotiation and adoption of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) – the first global, legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons. Africa’s principled support for the TPNW and its continued strong commitment to realising a world without nuclear weapons is demonstrated through the signature and ratification of the TPNW.

This paper addresses why it is so critical for African states to adhere to the TPNW as a matter of urgency, in particular because the use or atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons anywhere in the world would have a severe and immediate impact on the globe, including Africa, which is a nuclear-weapons-free zone.



BACKGROUND

The TPNW was adopted on 7 July 2017 at the United Nations, with the support of 122 states, including 42 African states. The Treaty was negotiated in response to the concern of the international community on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons. To date, 21 African states have signed it (Algeria, Angola, Benin, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, DR Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao Tome & Principe, Seychelles, South Africa, and Togo). So far, two of these signatories — Gambia and South Africa — have also ratified it, while a number of others have begun the process of ratification domestically. The TPNW enters into force once 50 states have ratified it; worldwide 22 had done so as of 1 April 2019.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TPNW FOR AFRICA

The risks of use of nuclear weapons are now as great as they were during the Cold War. The nuclear-armed states are engaged in modernizing their arsenals, committing huge sums of the money to the vicious spiral of a new nuclear arms race. Just weeks ago, two nuclear-armed states — India and Pakistan — fought out a brief armed conflict that could have seen each use nuclear weapons against the other. Had they done so, the devastating consequences would not have been confined to South-East Asia. Experts have calculated that nuclear war between the two nations involving just 100 Hiroshima-sized weapons (bombs with an explosive yield equivalent to about 15 kilotons of TNT) would cause worldwide climatic disruption and a catastrophic decline in food production across the planet putting up to 2 billion people at risk of starvation.² Africa would be especially vulnerable to the effects of a worldwide decline in food production noting the statistics on low food security.

We are still paying the price for atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons in 1944–80. Algeria suffered four atmospheric nuclear tests at the hands of France in the early 1960s, followed by more than a dozen underground tests. From February 1960 to February 1966, France detonated a total of 17 nuclear bombs in the Algerian Sahara. But atmospheric nuclear radiation is not geographically limited. Winds can carry particles of plutonium-239 thousand of kilometres away. Plutonium has a radioactive half-life of 24,000 years.³ If ingested, particles of plutonium and strontium never leave the body. The tests in Algeria spread radioactive fallout across the country, across Central and West Africa, and across the Mediterranean, including southern Europe. Irreversible contamination was inflicted on people, animals, vegetation, and the environment.⁴ It has been calculated that up to two million people worldwide have died or will die prematurely from cancer as a result of atmospheric testing around the world even though the last such test occurred almost forty years ago.⁵

Nuclear accidents remain a live issue. The United States has still not cleaned up all of the contaminated land in Palomares in Spain, the site of a nuclear accident in 1966 when a US B-52 bomber exploded mid-air. The plane was carrying four hydrogen bombs, each capable of releasing 1.45 megatons of explosive power: 100 times as much as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The bombs were not armed but the explosive core of two bombs detonated, scattering radioactive plutonium over a large area of farmland.⁶ As long as nuclear weapons exist, Africa is not immune to the occurrence of such accidents.

The effects are especially fierce in women and young children – who are biologically more vulnerable to the harmful effects of ionizing radiation than men.

But the consequences of harm from nuclear disaster come indirectly as well as directly. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross and Crescent (ICRC), a major radioactive event from nuclear weapon use or testing affecting would displace hundreds of thousands if not millions of people, leading to a huge humanitarian and social protection challenge to which health personnel and humanitarian agencies would not be able to respond adequately. The impact on the land would be poisoned air, soil, and water which would impact large populations access to vital services leading to migration. The clamour for scarce resources would be immense among populations; rampant crime to secure a living; epidemics and diseases with inadequate health provisions and facilities. Reaching affected populations would be almost impossible and dangerous due to poor road networks, limited communication, exposure to radiation and limited health care provisions. In the past, irradiated wheat harvested in Greece was mixed with clean wheat and then shipped to Africa as aid.⁷ Ashes and manure used for fertilizer are “exceptional radioactive concentrates”; flies that feed on manure will swarm onto food, adding radioactive contamination.⁸

The current expenditure on nuclear weapons by nuclear-armed states — approximately US\$2 trillion over the coming decades — will reduce funding for development and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

THE TPNW AND THE AFRICAN PEACE AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: THE AU ROLE

Ever since the 1963 OAU decision on the denuclearization of Africa, the AU has been active in nuclear disarmament. In 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the OAU/AU, African Heads of State adopted the Solemn Declaration, expressing determination to maintain a nuclear-free Africa and calling for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as part of the goal to achieve a conflict-free Africa by 2020.⁹ As such, the TPNW should be seen as a multilateral treaty that is a critical element in the broader African Peace and Security Architecture; one that is driven by the spirit of collective security and supports many of the AU’s current initiatives, including Silencing the Guns in Africa 2020, Agenda 2063: The Africa we want, and 2019: Year of Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons.

The TPNW builds on the achievement of the 1995 African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Pelindaba Treaty) that makes Africa a nuclear-weapons-free zone. The 41 states parties can join the TPNW without difficulty. Given the complementarity between the two treaties, progress in implementing one supports implementation in the other. In March 2018, states parties to the Pelindaba Treaty called on AU Member States to “speedily sign and ratify the treaty”, emphasising that this “advances international law in nuclear disarmament and is consistent with the goals of the Treaty of Pelindaba.”¹⁰

The TPNW is primarily a preventive instrument of international law, as are all disarmament treaties. Collective action is needed urgently to help ensure that a disaster does not occur. Crisis management of a nuclear disaster is not a realistic option and post-conflict reconstruction would be hugely challenging. Only prevention will be effective, and this demands the framing of the issue as a strategic priority.

Speedy entry into force of the TPNW will help to strengthen peace and security in the African Union. But Africa continues to have a critical role to play also in global security. By ensuring early entry into force and full implementation of the TPNW we will all be safer. It will put pressure on the nuclear-armed states and their allies to take more seriously their obligations under international law to move towards ending the arms race and proceeding to nuclear disarmament. Africa could and should play a central role in this; the alternative is too horrific to contemplate

NOTES:

1. At: <http://bit.ly/2HW0e92>.
2. International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), “Nuclear Famine: climate effects of regional nuclear war”, at: <http://bit.ly/210Jqxs>.
3. S. Plokhy, Chernobyl: History of a Tragedy, Allen Lane, United Kingdom, 2018, pp. xii, 343.
4. Samia Henni, “Toxic Imprints of Bleu, Blanc, Rouge: France’s Nuclear Bombs in the Algerian Sahara”, The Funambulist Vol. 14 (November–December 2017).
5. See, e.g., A. Makhijani and S. I. Schwartz, “Victims of the Bomb”, in S. I. Schwartz (ed.), Atomic Audit, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1998, p. 395ff.
6. K. Brown, Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future, Allen Lane, United Kingdom, 2019, p. 109.
7. Ibid., p. 105, citing inter alia IPS, “Wheat à la Chernobyl for the Third World”
8. Brown, Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future, p. 109.
9. AU, Fiftieth Anniversary Solemn Declaration, 2013, at: <http://bit.ly/2uuGfpY>.
10. Conclusions of the 4th Ordinary Session of the Conference of States Parties to the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba), 14–15 March 2018.

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