
Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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The humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons

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1. This working paper builds on a previous working paper submitted to the NPT Review Conference in 2015 (NPT/CONF.2015/WP.30) as well as to the 2018 Preparatory Committee (NPT/CONF.2020/PC.II/WP.9) on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. For sake of brevity, not all elements of the quoted papers are reproduced, although they remain relevant in their entirety. The present paper intends to provide an update to the former documents in the light of subsequent developments, as well as to reaffirm the significance of the issue in the framework of the NPT review process.

2. Knowledge of the humanitarian consequences and associated risks of nuclear weapons has been available since 1945 at the latest. The humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons have been reflected in numerous UN resolutions, including the first resolution passed by the General Assembly in 1946. The First Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to Disarmament (SSOD-1) stressed in 1978 that “*nuclear weapons pose the greatest danger to mankind and to the survival of civilization*”.

3. With respect to the NPT, the awareness of these consequences was indeed one of the key drivers for its negotiation, as evidenced in its preambular paragraph 1: “*Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples (...)*”.

4. It was the NPT Review Conference in 2010, the latest to date to produce an outcome document, which gave specific focus to this issue in its consensual conclusions and recommendations for follow-on actions (2010 Action Plan) by expressing “*its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons [...] reaffirm(ing) the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law*”. Moreover, the 2010 NPT Review Conference resolved in Action 1 of the 2010 Action Plan that “*All States parties*

commit to pursue policies that are fully compatible with the Treaty and the objective of achieving a world without nuclear weapons.”

5. The increased focus of the international community on the humanitarian consequences of and risks associated with nuclear weapons can be seen as an amplification of the deep concern expressed at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and a valuable component of States parties' efforts to implement Action 1 of the 2010 Action Plan.

6. Reflecting the centrality of the humanitarian imperative to the NPT, the overwhelming majority of States Parties have supported and participated in activities that have heightened awareness about the fundamental importance of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons for the sake of all humanity.

7. The three international conferences hosted by the Governments of Norway, Mexico and Austria in 2013 and 2014 accumulated evidence that the consequences for humanity of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective its cause, would include death, destruction and displacement as well as profound and long-term damage to human health, the environment, climate and socio-economic development. The evidence showed that the scope, scale and interrelationship of the humanitarian consequences caused by nuclear weapon detonations were catastrophic and more complex than commonly understood and could even threaten the survival of humankind. It also showed that nuclear weapons have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation. Moreover, new threats from cyber and terrorism relating to nuclear weapons came to the fore. An equally important result of the conferences was to show that the risk of nuclear war was much higher than was generally believed at that period.

8. As a result of the Vienna Conference, the “Humanitarian Pledge” subsequently endorsed by 127 States concluded that only the total elimination of nuclear weapons could reliably remove the risk of their use with its unacceptable humanitarian consequences, and called for the negotiation of an international instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, as a first essential step towards elimination.

9. Importantly, the broad “humanitarian movement” manifesting itself at the three conferences comprised not only a large number of States, but also international organisations with a humanitarian mission such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as global civil society consolidated in the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). In recognition of its work for raising awareness about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, as well as for bringing about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (see below), ICAN was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2017.

10. At the NPT Review Conference 2015, the results of the humanitarian discussions so far were summarised and presented in a “Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons” delivered on behalf of 159 countries by Austria's then foreign minister Sebastian Kurz.

11. Based on a recommendation from the Report of the Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations established by the General Assembly in its resolution 70/33, inspired by the humanitarian discussions and consistent with the “Humanitarian Pledge” (see above), the United Nations General Assembly in 2016 in its resolution 71/258 mandated negotiations on a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons leading towards their total elimination. The negotiations were successfully concluded with the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) by 122 States on July 7, 2017.

12. The awareness about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons will motivate universalisation and implementation of the TPNW now embedded into the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime with the NPT as its cornerstone.

13. At the same time, the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons remain an important issue for discussion within the framework of the NPT. In the pursuit of the key objectives of the NPT, the full and effective implementation of the Treaty and the obligations and commitments on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation reached at the previous Review Conferences, the following recommendations regarding the subject matter of this working paper to the 2020 Review Conference are made:

i. To welcome that during the past two review cycles, findings and evidence on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons have been presented in fact-based discussions, including at international conferences.

ii. To recognize that the immediate, mid- and long-term consequences of nuclear weapon detonations inter alia on health, environment, infrastructure, food security, climate, development, social cohesion and the global economy are significantly graver than previously understood, interlinked, and would not be constrained by national borders but have regional or global effects, and may even threaten the survival of humanity.

iii. To be aware that the risk of a nuclear weapon explosion is significantly greater than previously assumed and is further increasing with proliferation, the lowering of the technical threshold for nuclear weapon capability and with the danger of the access to nuclear weapons and related material by terrorist groups; iv To recognize the vulnerability of nuclear weapon systems in the age of cyberattacks, in which data manipulation and other malicious cyber activities could lead to wrong decisions/mistakes or even a loss of control by States possessing nuclear weapons over these weapons;

v. To express dismay at the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and to reaffirm the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law.

vi. To recognize that evidence that has emerged about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons lends further strength to the view that these weapons cannot be used in conformity with international law, in particular international humanitarian law.

vii. To emphasize that the consequences of nuclear weapon detonations and the risks associated with this weaponry concern the security of all humanity.

viii. To affirm that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances.

ix. To be cognisant of the fact that the risk of nuclear weapons' use can only be avoided through the total elimination of nuclear weapons and maintenance of a world free of nuclear weapons, an objective of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the latter being an effective legal measure under Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

x. To recognize that the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons acknowledge the deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and that awareness of these consequences must underpin all approaches and efforts towards nuclear disarmament.

xi. To emphasize that the scope of consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation and risks associated raise profound moral and ethical questions.

xii. To commit to further enhance awareness of the humanitarian impact of and risks associated with nuclear weapons with a view to increasing the urgency with which a world without nuclear weapons is pursued and achieved.

xiii. To call on the nuclear-weapon States, pending the total elimination of their nuclear weapon arsenals, to take concrete interim measures with urgency to reduce the risk of nuclear weapon detonations and to increase their transparency and accountability in this regard.

xiv. To urge the nuclear-weapon States to revise their policies with regard to nuclear weapons, as necessary, in a way that promotes nuclear disarmament as mandated under article VI of the Treaty and thereby contributes to achieving the Treaty's overarching objective of a world without nuclear weapons

xv. To stress that in light of the growing understanding of the risk posed by nuclear weapons and their devastating humanitarian consequences, there is an urgent need for the full implementation of existing obligations under the NPT and its previous Review Conferences to identify and pursue effective measures for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons, and to call on all States parties to spare no efforts in this regard.
