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Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Day: Time for action on nuclear weapons

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iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand has written to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully today, Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Day - the 59th anniversary of the largest nuclear weapon detonation, the 'Bravo' nuclear bomb test conducted by the United States close to the surface of Bikini Atoll, in the Marshall Islands - to remind the New Zealand government once more of the crucial importance of the elimination of nuclear weapons for our region, the Pacific, and indeed for the world.

Communities immediately downwind of the Bravo detonation suffered exposure to near fatal levels of radioactivity, and the blast created a fallout cloud which covered Rongelap Atoll (100 miles away) and Utrik Atoll (320 miles away). Fallout from just this one nuclear weapon detonation spread over more than 7,000 square miles, and traces were detected throughout the Pacific, in India, Japan, the United States and Europe.

The catastrophic consequences of that detonation, along with the other 66 nuclear weapons tests in the area, on the health of the Marshallese people and on the environment are well documented, most recently, in the Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on his 2012 visit to the Marshall Islands and the United States, who summarised it thus:

The nuclear testing resulted in both immediate and continuing effects on the human rights of the Marshallese. According to information received by the Special Rapporteur, radiation from the testing resulted in fatalities and in acute and long-term health complications. The effects of radiation have been exacerbated by near-irreversible environmental contamination, leading to the loss of livelihoods and lands.¹

Next week, the Norwegian government will host the international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Oslo, which includes sessions on the immediate humanitarian impact of a nuclear weapon detonation, the wider impact and longer-term consequences, and the lack of capacity - at the national and global levels - to provide appropriate humanitarian assistance to survivors in the event of a nuclear attack.

While the possible use of nuclear weapons has been debated in terms of military security and geopolitical issues over many years, the Oslo conference is the first time that states have come together to address the consequences in humanitarian terms. The evidence to be presented at the conference will undoubtedly lead to the conclusion that the very existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to global peace and security, and that the catastrophic and unacceptable consequences of any use inevitably means nuclear weapons must now be banned.

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand is very pleased that the New Zealand government will be participating in the Oslo conference, along with representatives of more than 120 other states. However, we have reminded the Minister of Foreign Affairs that simply attending the conference is insufficient

to implement the recommendations in the 2012 Report of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee on the iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand petition to Parliament, which concluded:

On balance we believe that the time is right for the New Zealand Government to support a nuclear weapons convention. We see New Zealand's geopolitical role as one of pushing the boundaries towards peaceful resolutions. It has been traditionally ahead of the pack in matters of disarmament, and this is a good opportunity to take an active role regarding the abolition of nuclear weapons, as it did regarding cluster munitions. New Zealand has had a significant impact in this area and we look for this to continue.

While we acknowledge the difficulty, complexity, and cost of negotiating a convention, we believe New Zealand should move beyond a position of general support to the forefront of negotiations towards a nuclear weapons convention.

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand has also reminded the Minister of Foreign Affairs of New Zealand's historic leadership role in relation to nuclear weapons, including active opposition to nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific, three appearances before the International Court of Justice, the establishment of the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, and the enactment of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987; as well as New Zealand's leading role in the Oslo diplomatic process that led to the Cluster Munitions Convention, including hosting the key Wellington Conference in February 2008.

A global ban on nuclear weapons is long overdue, and iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand shares the view of the Select Committee that New Zealand should now move to the forefront of negotiations towards such a ban.

We have therefore urged the Minister of Foreign Affairs to take the opportunity of the Oslo conference to move New Zealand once again to a position of global leadership on nuclear weapons, and to instruct the diplomatic representatives present to take the floor during the conference to announce New Zealand's support for negotiations to begin on a global ban on nuclear weapons, using a fast-track diplomatic process such as the Oslo process on cluster munitions, and preparedness to take a leading role in this, including hosting a follow-up conference in Wellington.

Such a crucial contribution to global peace and security would not only be of immense benefit to the international community, but would also assist with New Zealand's current bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

About iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand: iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand is the one of the national campaigns of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (iCAN), which also has more than 270 partner organisations in 60 countries around the world. iCAN is the Norwegian government's civil society partner for the international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons that will be held in Oslo next week.

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand has nineteen supporting organisations, fifteen national and four local NGOs. In common with the other iCAN national campaigns, our goal is the elimination of nuclear weapons through a global treaty to ban their possession, production, deployment, use and threat of use. More information about iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand is available at <http://www.icanw.org.nz>

¹ Mission to the Marshall Islands: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes, 3 September 2012, A/HRC/21/48/Add.1