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Twenty-fifth anniversary: Time for action on a global ban on nuclear weapons

8 June 2012

Today is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the commencement of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987¹, a time to celebrate and to remember all those who worked to achieve the ban here in Aotearoa New Zealand, and those who continue to campaign in the Pacific and around the world for a global ban on nuclear weapons. It is time also to assess what the government could be doing to bring about a nuclear weapons-free world.

This action alert has four sections: 1) Introduction, 2) How can the abolition of nuclear weapons be achieved? 3) What can the New Zealand government do? and 4) From nuclear weapons-free Aotearoa New Zealand to a nuclear weapons-free world: What can you do?

Introduction

Since the detonation of the first atomic bomb in July 1945, the threat of use of nuclear weapons has cast a shadow over the future of the earth.

Every stage of the production of nuclear weapons has caused immeasurable harm to human health and wellbeing, and extensive contamination of the environment - from uranium mining, processing of radioactive materials, manufacturing of nuclear warheads, through to nuclear bomb testing.

Despite ongoing widespread public opposition to nuclear weapons, and the overwhelming majority of governments around the world now supporting the abolition of these weapons of mass destruction, little progress has been made - around 19,000 nuclear warheads remain in the arsenals of eight nuclear weapons states (Britain, China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia and the United States), of which 4,400 are operationally deployed.²

Other weapons of mass destruction - chemical and biological weapons - have been banned by international law, as have 'indiscriminate' weapons such as anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions.

An international convention (treaty) to abolish nuclear weapons is long overdue.

How can the abolition of nuclear weapons be achieved?

The surest way to abolish nuclear weapons is through the negotiation and adoption of a new global treaty to prohibit the development, production, testing, deployment, stockpiling,

transfer, threat of use, and use of nuclear weapons. Use of conventional diplomatic processes, and existing international law such as the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), have not resulted in a ban on nuclear weapons. It is time to use a fast-track diplomatic initiative similar to the Ottawa Process that led to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and the Oslo Process which resulted in the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions.

The process of negotiating a treaty banning nuclear weapons must apply humanitarian disarmament principals by engaging all states, including small and medium-sized non-nuclear states. As was the case for the successful movements to ban landmines and cluster bombs, a diplomatic process on nuclear weapons must involve civil society, including representatives of communities affected by nuclear weapons production, testing and use.

New Zealand was one of six governments that led the Oslo Process to ban cluster bombs, hosting a key meeting in Wellington as part of the process. It is time for the government to now take a leading role in achieving an international convention to ban nuclear members.

What can the New Zealand government do?

On 8 June 1987, the New Zealand government cemented its global leadership credentials on nuclear disarmament by passing the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act (the Act). The Act established the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, and prohibits nuclear weapons and nuclear-powered vessels from entering our territorial waters and airspace. It also bans biological weapons.

Crucially, the Act requires the government to *“promote and encourage an active and effective contribution by New Zealand to the essential process of disarmament and international arms control”* and to implement treaties including the NPT, which requires state parties to *“pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”*.

Over the past twenty five years, while successive New Zealand governments have committed variable levels of attention and resources towards different aspects of nuclear disarmament, there has not yet been a concerted focus on achieving the goal of abolishing nuclear weapons.

Recent developments - such as the disestablishment of the position of Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control in December 2011³ which resulted in the Disarmament and Arms Control portfolio being rolled into Foreign Affairs; and the reforms at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade which may exacerbate the ongoing issue of inadequate resourcing for New Zealand’s disarmament diplomats - have raised serious concerns about the level of commitment of the current government to disarmament and arms control generally, and specifically to the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Yet the time is right for the government to take action on this. In April 2012, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, announced Norway would host a conference in Oslo next year to *“highlight different aspects of nuclear weapons as a humanitarian problem”*⁴. The conference provides an excellent opportunity for the New Zealand government to proactively join with Norway, and other like minded governments, to lead the process to abolish nuclear weapons. An announcement of support for the Norwegian initiative would demonstrate its

commitment to banning nuclear weapons and reestablish the government's global leadership credentials in this area.

On 31 May 2012, there was cross party support for a Notice of Motion presented to parliament by Maryan Street (Labour), *That this House:*

- *celebrate the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act;*
- *reaffirm the commitment of New Zealand to the achievement of a nuclear-weapons-free world;*
- *welcome the 2010 agreement of States Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that any use of nuclear weapons could create catastrophic humanitarian consequences and that all States must play a role in building the framework for a nuclear-weapons-free world;*
- *commend Norway for its announcement to hold a conference in 2013 on humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons in order to build political momentum for a global ban; and*
- *call on the New Zealand Government to provide its highest support for this conference.*

Despite supporting the Notice of Motion, the government does not yet appear to be fully committed to the goal of a new treaty to achieve "a nuclear-weapons-free world". On the same day, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Murray McCully, said in parliament:

*"The position of successive New Zealand Governments has been one of general support for such a convention when circumstances are such that it has a realistic chance of success, and in the meantime to focus on practical measures to reduce nuclear dangers. I am advised that the prospects of successfully negotiating such a treaty at the present time would be poor. For that reason, at Government level internationally, there are no serious moves afoot to get negotiations on a convention under way."*⁵

This statement bears an uncanny resemblance to the government's argument against banning landmines in 1995. At that time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Don McKinnon, said that realistically antipersonnel landmines could only be abolished in a series of steps, that the campaign to abolish landmines was not credible, and that "a credible solution has to be a workable solution, and sometimes that only comes about by degrees and not by bold initiatives that fall on deaf ears". Yet the Mine Ban Treaty was signed only eighteen months later ...

The current Minister of Foreign Affairs seems now to be out of step with both popular opinion and the position of the majority of states around the world - for example, last year 130 states voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution which called on all states to immediately commence "*multilateral negotiations leading to an early conclusion of a nuclear weapons convention prohibiting the development, production, testing, deployment, stockpiling, transfer, threat or use of nuclear weapons and providing for their elimination*"⁶.

It is time now for action on a global ban on nuclear weapons, for the New Zealand government to take a leading role in this process, and for you to take action to help achieve this.

From nuclear weapons-free Aotearoa New Zealand to a nuclear weapons-free world: What can you do?

Vote in the online poll: Vote in the online poll 'From nuclear weapons-free Aotearoa New Zealand to a nuclear weapons-free world: should the New Zealand government take a leading role in starting the process of negotiating a global treaty to prohibit the development, production, testing, deployment, stockpiling, transfer, threat of use, and use of nuclear weapons?' at <http://www.facebook.com/questions/386136508100391>

Lobby politicians: Write to the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs including some or all of the points above, and lobby your Member of Parliament. Information about why a fast-track diplomatic process for nuclear weapons abolition is necessary, the level of support for a convention to ban nuclear weapons, and why the New Zealand government should take a leading role in a fast-track diplomatic process to achieve such a convention is available in the Peace Movement Aotearoa submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee on the iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand (iCAN ANZ) petition to parliament at www.icanw.org.nz

Contact details: Prime Minister John Key, email j.key@ministers.govt.nz Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully, email m.mccully@ministers.govt.nz or write to them at or write to them at Private Bag 18888, Parliament Buildings, Wellington 6160 (no stamp is needed when you are writing as an individual to a member of Parliament or a Minister, postage is required if you are writing on behalf of an organisation).

Please send iCAN ANZ a copy of any letter, fax, or message you send, and of any replies you receive, to help with developing the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons.

Make your views publicly known: Do a media release or statement about your support for a global ban on nuclear weapons - these could be tied to particular organisational events, for example, your Annual General Meeting, conference or Hui a Tau; or to significant dates, for example, the anniversary of the commencement of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act (8 June), Hiroshima Day (6 August), Nagasaki Day (9 August), the International Day of Peace (21 September), Human Rights Day (10 December), or Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Day (1 March).

Add your organisation to the list of campaign supporters: local and national non-governmental organisations - peace, disarmament, human rights, social justice, health, development, education, in schools and universities, faith groups, churches, or whatever the focus of your group is - are invited to join the call for a global ban on nuclear weapons to be negotiated without delay, and for the New Zealand government to take a leading role in achieving this.

If you would like your organisation added to the list of supporting organisations, please send the name of the organisation and the contact person, and the url for your website if you have one, to icanz@xtra.co.nz

Join the mailing list: If you would like to be added to the iCAN ANZ mailing list, please send your details to icanz@xtra.co.nz

Help spread the word: Help spread the word about iCAN ANZ by sharing the link to www.icanw.org.nz - by email, on your facebook page, on your web site, and tweet it.

All of the campaign materials can be downloaded and printed at www.icanw.org.nz - email a copy of 'Time for action on a global ban on nuclear weapons' to your friends, family and colleagues.

Help with the campaign costs: If you can give a donation to help with the costs of the campaign, that would be much appreciated. Please either: send a cheque payable to 'Peace Movement Aotearoa' to Peace Movement Aotearoa, PO Box 9314, Wellington 6141, with a note saying it is for iCAN ANZ and your name and address so we can send you a tax credit receipt; or to make a donation by internet banking or direct credit, please email icanz@xtra.co.nz for details. Thank you.

References

¹ The legislation is available at <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/0086/latest/whole.html>

² World nuclear forces, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2012/07>

³ For more information: 'New Zealand scraps its disarmament minister', 13 December 2011 at <http://www.stopclusterbombs.org.nz/2011/12/13/new-zealand-scraps-disarmament-minister> 'Act now! Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control disestablished', 15 December 2011 at <http://www.facebook.com/notes/peace-movement-aotearoa/act-now-minister-for-disarmament-and-arms-control-disestablished/278032558910787> and 'Green Party re-establishes disarmament portfolio', 16 December 2011 at <http://www.facebook.com/notes/peace-movement-aotearoa/green-party-re-establishes-disarmament-portfolio/278686075512102>

⁴ 'Norway announces nuclear weapons conference', 21 April 2012 at <http://www.facebook.com/notes/peace-movement-aotearoa/norway-announces-nuclear-weapons-conference-an-opportunity-for-new-zealand/356298101084232>

⁵ For the full text of the exchange in parliament see 'NZ government's position on a nuclear weapons convention', 1 June 2012 at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/ican-nzgov0512.pdf>

⁶ The voting pattern on last year's Resolution A/RES/66/46 'Follow-up to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons' is a good indication of the level of state support for the immediate commencement of negotiations for a convention to ban nuclear weapons. The Resolution includes, among other things: 1. *Underlines once again* the unanimous conclusion of the International Court of Justice that there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control; 2. *Calls once again upon* all States immediately to fulfil that obligation by commencing multilateral negotiations leading to an early conclusion of a nuclear weapons convention prohibiting the development, production, testing, deployment, stockpiling, transfer, threat or use of nuclear weapons and providing for their elimination" at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/461/58/PDF/N1146158.pdf?OpenElement> In the First Committee on 27 October 2011, there were **127 votes in favour** of the Resolution, 25 against and 22 abstentions; and in the General Assembly on 2 December 2011, **130 states voted in favour**, 26 voted against and there were 23 abstentions.