International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons statement to First Committee
28 October 2014, New York

Nuclear disarmament has for too long been about waiting. Waiting for nuclear-armed states to fulfill their obligations. Waiting for the so-called “conditions” to be right for disarmament.

While we wait, we do not get closer to the elimination of nuclear weapons or to a more secure world. While we wait, the risks of the use of nuclear weapons remain or even increase. While we wait, the catastrophic and overwhelming consequences of such use do not diminish.

We do not have time to wait.

The conferences on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons hosted by Norway and Mexico have clearly explained and documented these consequences.

Physicians, physicists, climate scientists, humanitarian agencies, and survivors have all presented alarming evidence about the effects of nuclear weapons.

This evidence has shown that a single nuclear weapon can destroy an entire city, inflicting massive numbers of instantaneous casualties.

This evidence has shown that acute radiation injuries kill people in a matter of minutes, days, or weeks; and that radiation-caused cancers and other illnesses continue to kill for years among those directly exposed and across generations.

This evidence has shown that the use of even a small fraction of existing nuclear arsenals would cause environmental devastation, including disruption of the global climate and agricultural production.

This evidence cannot be ignored.

We know that the only way to ensure these consequences will never occur is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. And the only way to do that is to eliminate them entirely. The General Assembly, NPT states parties, the International Court of Justice, the overwhelming majority of states that belong to nuclear-weapon-free zones, and civil society have all said this repeatedly. That part of the debate is over.

We don’t have time to wait. States are in fact legally bound not to wait. Every state party to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is committed to pursuing effective measures for nuclear disarmament.

Most importantly, we do not have to wait.

While the nuclear-armed states modernise their arsenals and refuse to engage in multilateral negotiations for nuclear disarmament as they are obliged to do, there is at least one effective measure that the rest of the world can take.

That is to prohibit nuclear weapons through a legally-binding instrument.
This is not a radical proposal. Indiscriminate weapons get banned. It is what we do as human society in the interests of protecting ourselves. We have done it before with other weapon systems, including biological and chemical weapons. A treaty banning nuclear weapons would complete the set of prohibitions against WMD.

This should not be a controversial proposal. An international prohibition is merely the logical outcome of an examination of the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons detonation. It is complementary to existing international law governing nuclear weapons.

This is a meaningful proposal. It could have a variety of effects on the policy and practice of states. It could establish a comprehensive set of prohibitions and provide a framework under which the elimination of nuclear weapons can be pursued.

This is a feasible, achievable proposal. It can be negotiated in the near-term, and have normative and practical impacts for the long-term.

Naturally, as we get closer to beginning a diplomatic process, thoughts will turn to how and where such a treaty should be negotiated.

ICAN has no fixed view on this except that effective processes that have meaningful results tend to be based on some important principles of multilateralism. Negotiations must be inclusive, democratic, and involve civil society and international organisations.

A crucial foundation for our confidence in this idea is the conviction that such a treaty can and should be negotiated by those states ready to do so, even if the states with nuclear weapons oppose it and decide not to participate. A few recalcitrant states should not be able to block a successful outcome.

It would be better for all states to participate and to move towards prohibition and elimination without delay.

But this seems unlikely at the present time.

While we must keep working towards that goal with absolute determination, we believe states should put a prohibition in place now.

To the nuclear-armed states that see this as a hostile idea: it is not. You have applauded groups of states for adopting nuclear-weapon-free zones in their regions. Globalising this prohibition on nuclear weapons will give increased political and legal space for you to pursue elimination. All of you have registered your commitment to a nuclear-free world. A prohibition of nuclear weapons is an important part of the process to achieve that universal goal.

To the states in alliances with nuclear-armed states that are concerned such a treaty would be inconsistent with existing commitments: it would not be. All states have agreed that nuclear weapons should be eliminated. No security alliances have ever crumbled because a weapon system was outlawed and eliminated. Any states that consider humanitarian action a priority should understand that a ban treaty would be consistent with their existing obligations and principles.

To the states that have already foresworn nuclear weapons through the NPT and nuclear-weapon-free zones, and that might baulk at the idea of taking on more of the burden for nuclear disarmament: this ban treaty will not be a burden. It will reinforce the stigma against nuclear weapons. It will undermine their purported value. It will further erode any misplaced perceptions that these weapons of mass destruction confer symbolic power and prestige. It will make global the commitments you have already made regionally. It will give you an opportunity to take charge, for nuclear disarmament is the responsibility and right of everyone. Finally, it will have normative and practical impacts that will facilitate elimination.
We welcome the opportunity to consider this approach with you. As Kenya said earlier this month, discussions about this should not cause anxiety.

A window of opportunity is now open to take an important next step towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.

We should seize this opportunity before it closes. The conferences in Oslo and Nayarit have helped us see nuclear weapons as the devastating and inhumane weapons they are. We’re confident that the Vienna conference in December will reinforce that humanitarian perspective.

It is clear to us that the logical conclusion of these evidence-based gatherings is to begin a diplomatic process to prohibit nuclear weapons through a legally binding instrument.

This will take courage. We have confidence that the overwhelming majority of states will join this process. And we look forward to accompanying you along the road to a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

This statement was prepared and delivered by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (www.icanw.org), which represents more than 360 partner organisations in 93 countries.