

Disarmament Times

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OPINION | *Ira Helfand & Andrew S. Kanter*

Hope for Nuclear Abolition: The Humanitarian Perspective

Something has changed! For the first time in a long while, there is hope for significant movement towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. In March 2013, 130 nations gathered in Oslo, Norway, to discuss the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war. This diplomatic meeting was preceded by a civil society forum involving hundreds of people, many of whom were under the age of 30.

These events were the latest milestones in a movement that can be traced to 2005, the year the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference failed to make progress, in fact, lost ground, in the push for nuclear disarmament. In the face of such disappointing results, we who are members of civil society groups recommitted ourselves to finding an alternate path to nuclear disarmament. The approach we have been pursuing since takes as its focus the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Our work has been given new urgency by recent findings that even a limited nuclear exchange could be catastrophic globally.

Shifting the Focus in the Nuclear Debate

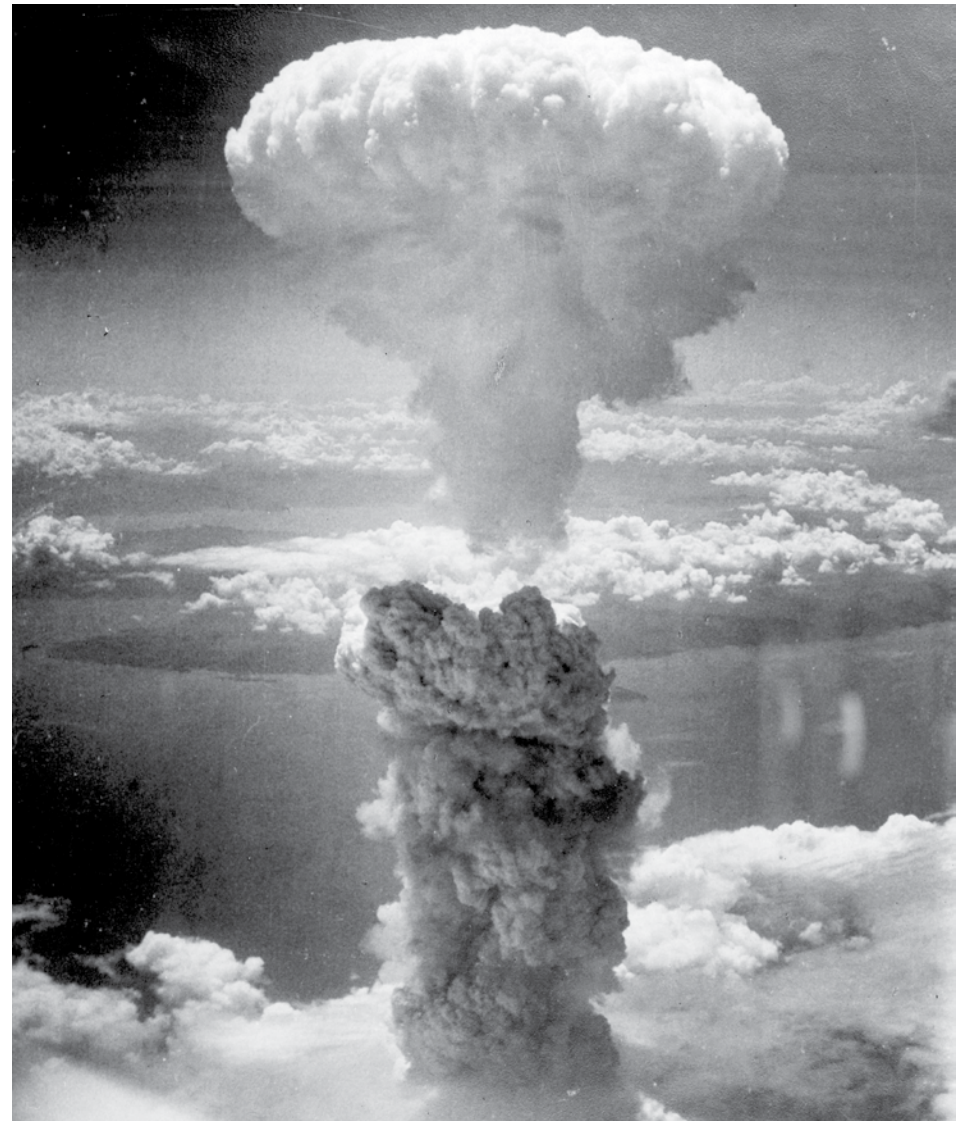
Two years after the failed NPT review conference, in 2007, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) (the group with which we are affiliated) launched the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), bringing together organizations from more than 80 countries to focus on the humanitarian threat posed by nuclear weapons.

Increasingly, attention to the potential consequences is being paid in multiple fora. The 2010 NPT Review Conference for the first time expressed “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.”

A resolution adopted at the 2011 meeting of the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement similarly stated, “Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power, in the unspeakable human suffering they cause, in the impossibility of controlling their effects in space and time, and in the threat they pose to the environment, to future generations, and indeed to the survival of humanity.”¹

Then, in October 2012, 34 United Nations member states, plus the Holy See, made a Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Dimension of Nuclear Disarmament in the U.N. General Assembly’s First Committee, and the following April, at the NPT Preparatory Committee held in Geneva, 80 governments signed on to a Joint Statement on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.

Momentum continued in October, when in the U.N.’s First Committee, 124 countries signed on to a statement expressing grave concerns over the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. It called for all countries to participate in a follow-up meeting to Oslo, in Mexico, in February 2014.



U.S. National Archives

The Bombing of Nagasaki, Japan, August 9, 1945

As a result of the American nuclear attack, an estimated 150,000 people were killed in Hiroshima and 75,000 in Nagasaki, although the actual death toll will never be known.

“Limited” War, Global Effects

Recent medical and environmental data adds urgency to our cause, finding that nuclear weapons are not only genocidal, but they are also ecocidal; they pose an unacceptable risk to all life on this planet.

In 2006, Alan Robock, Brian Toon and their colleagues first examined the consequences of a limited nuclear war between India and Pakistan.² They chose this scenario because of the long history of conflict between these two nuclear-armed states and the ongoing, unresolved potential for further conflict. During one crisis in the 1990’s, it was reported that Pakistani planes armed with nuclear bombs were kept on the runway with their engines running 24 hours a day so they would be ready for takeoff on a few minutes’ notice.³ It is easy to imagine events — an increase of tension in disputed Kashmir, or another terrorist attack like those at the Indian parliament in 2001 or in Mumbai in 2008 — that could escalate into full scale warfare.

In their study, Robock and Toon assumed that each country launched 50 Hiroshima

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ian consequences of the increasing use of armed drones and questioned their compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights. Several delegations emphasized the need to develop a legal framework regarding the use and proliferation of drones.

Similarly, several delegations called for robust discussions on fully autonomous weapon systems. The development of “killer robots” raises political, legal, ethical, technical, and military questions that must be addressed. The ICRC warned against the development of such weapons, arguing that it remains unclear whether these weapons would be able to successfully distinguish between civilian and combatant targets or to adhere to international humanitarian law, especially regarding proportionality and precaution in attacks. Costa Rica called on states to contemplate instituting national moratoria on the development, production, and use of autonomous weapon systems.

It is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances All States share the responsibility to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, to prevent their vertical and horizontal proliferation and to achieve nuclear disarmament . . .

*Joint Statement on behalf of 125 countries
Delivered Oct. 21, Amb. Dell Higgle, New Zealand*

Conclusion

From nuclear to conventional to new high-tech weapons, U.N. member states demonstrated their increasing concern with the humanitarian and environmental consequences of weapons during the 2013 session of First Committee. However, it remains to be seen if their rhetorical concern will translate into concerted action. “The increased focus on the well-being and security of the individual within our societies, as well as the discernible emphasis on [international humanitarian law] and the importance of abiding by its terms,” is “good news,” said Ambassador Dell Higgle of New Zealand. But she also cautioned that when we fail to move forward, it is individual citizens who often pay the price. Hopefully the trend of putting welfare over warfare will continue and move beyond words in First Committee to action in all relevant venues.

Ray Acheson is the director of Reaching Critical Will, a project of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. She edits the *First Committee Monitor*, which provides civil society reporting and analysis from First Committee each year. Reaching Critical Will’s website is at www.reachingcriticalwill.org

Hope for Nuclear Abolition



U.N. Photo / John Isaac

A girl works in a rice field near Chengdu, Sichuan. Studies have found that even “limited” nuclear war in Asia could bring declines of 15 percent in middle season rice production in China, possibly impacting hundreds of millions of people.

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sized bombs against urban targets in the other country. The weapons involved represent less than one half of the current Indian and Pakistani arsenals, and less than 0.5 percent of the world’s nuclear arsenals. The immediate casualties were catastrophic: 20 million dead in the first week from blast effects, burns, and acute radiation exposure. However, it was the global climate disruption that brought a new dimension to our understanding of the consequences of nuclear weapons.

The scientists found that the firestorms generated by these nuclear explosions would loft five million tons of black soot high into the atmosphere where it would block out sunlight and drop surface temperatures across the planet an average of 1.25° C for a decade. The cooling would be much more severe in the internal regions of the major continents, shortening the growing season in areas where much of the world’s grain is produced. In addition, the cooling would lower total precipitation worldwide, as less water evaporating from the oceans would fall back as rain or snow, and there would be significant changes in the pattern of precipitation as well. Further, the soot particles would increase the heating of the upper atmosphere, leading to a major decrease in stratospheric ozone. This would allow substantially more ultraviolet light to reach the earth’s surface further reducing crop yields.

The climate disruption predicted by the Robock and Toon study has been independently confirmed in studies performed by Michael Mills and Thomas Peter, each of whom considered the same limited war scenario but used a different climate model.⁴

In the last two years, a number of studies have attempted to look at the ef-

fect this climate disruption would have on food production. Mutlu Özdoğan and colleagues looked at soybean and corn production in the United States “corn belt” and found an average decline of seven percent in soybean production and 12 percent in corn production in the decade following a limited war in South Asia.⁵ Lili Xia and Alan Robock examined the impact on middle season rice production in China and found an average 15 percent decline over the 10 years following this conflict.⁶

There are approximately 870 million people in the world today who are malnourished. A 10, 15 or 30 percent decline in their food consumption, sustained over a full decade, would

be catastrophic. However, the decline in food consumption could be much larger. The world’s food distribution system has been fine-tuned to deliver products to market quickly. It is tremendously transportation-dependent and much less food is in storage than a decade ago. World grain reserves today amount to less than 70 days of consumption and would not offer a significant buffer against a sharp and sustained reduction in grain harvests. Market forces would magnify the impact of the declining production, with large increases in food prices due to panic buying and reduction in supply making the food that was available inaccessible to the poor, who have trouble buying enough to eat at current prices.

More than 300 million people live in countries where much of the food is imported. Most of the countries of North Africa, the Middle East, and many of the wealthy industrial countries of East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia, are dependent on outside producers for their food. In the face of significant and sustained declines in agricultural production, it is likely that grain-exporting countries would suspend exports. This has happened repeatedly for limited periods over the last decade in response to localized crop shortfalls. We must add a number of these 300 million people to those already mentioned who would be at risk for malnutrition and famine.

New Findings Indicate Greater Potential for Famine

Last April, at the Nobel Peace Laureate’s Summit in Chicago, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and its U.S. affiliate, Physicians for Social Responsibility, released a report, *Nuclear*

Famine, examining this potential catastrophe. The report reviewed the scientific studies and concluded that more than one billion people might starve as a result of a limited, regional nuclear war in South Asia.

Since then, Xia and Robock have generated new data that examines the impact of a limited nuclear war in South Asia on additional grain crops in China. Their findings show that other grains are affected much more severely than rice. In particular, production of China’s second largest grain crop, winter wheat, would be reduced by as much as 50 percent in the first year, with an overall reduction of 31 percent over the decade.⁷

These new findings suggest that the original *Nuclear Famine* report may have actually underestimated the extent of the catastrophe that would follow a regional nuclear conflict. The original report assumed that China, along with most of the rest of the industrial world, would be spared significant famine. The new studies suggest that, in fact, there might be widespread starvation in China as well, putting an additional 1.3 billion people at risk. At the very least, the predicted food shortfalls would create a decade of severe economic and social instability that could easily envelope the region.

Nuclear Arsenals a Threat Globally

These findings clearly have enormous implications for nuclear policy globally. Not only India and Pakistan, but also the arsenals of the United Kingdom, France, China and Israel are all capable of causing the same or greater degree of climate disruption and famine. Moreover, the arsenals of the United States and Russia are even more concerning. The U.S. and Russia have 16,200 nuclear warheads combined. Each United States Trident submarine can carry 96 warheads, each of which is 10 to 30 times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and the weapons used in the South Asia study) and therefore, each submarine can produce the nuclear famine scenario many times over. The United States has 14 Trident submarines, as well as a substantial arsenal of land-based missiles and a fleet of strategic bombers armed with cruise missiles and gravity bombs.

Russia maintains a similar number of weapons. Even with dramatic reductions in nuclear weapons, if Russia and the U.S. used the 1,500 weapons allowed under the recently negotiated New START treaty, the original model by Robock et al. predicts 150 million tons of smoke and soot (compared to the five million tons in the South Asia scenario). This would produce an average drop in temperature of not 1.25° C but of 8° C for a decade. There would be areas of central North America, Europe and Asia where the temperature drop would be 20 to 30° C. The world has not seen temperatures such as this since the middle of the last ice age. All agricultural production would likely cease. The famine would be nearly incomprehensible and global. Entire ecosystems would per-

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Hope for Nuclear Abolition

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ish, and the human race could very well become extinct.

The Possibility of Nuclear War

So what is our response to this humanitarian catastrophe? The five permanent members of the Security Council, all nuclear weapons countries, boycotted the Oslo meeting, asserting that its focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons was a distraction from the real work of disarmament. Their coordinated position statements rationalized that we do not need to bother with humanitarian consequences because a detonation is such a low probability event.

But we cannot ignore the real risk of a nuclear exchange between the nuclear superpowers. Even if the likelihood of a deliberate nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia has declined, there remains the possibility of an accidental nuclear war. We know of at least five incidents since 1979 when either Moscow or Washington prepared to launch a nuclear war in the mistaken belief that it was already under attack by the other side.^{8,9} The most recent known incident occurred in January of 1995, a full five years after the end of the Cold War. The conditions that nearly lead to our destruction then remain fundamentally unchanged today.

A computer failure, human error, or perhaps a cyber attack could lead to the unintended launch of nuclear weapons. And as disastrous as that would be for the direct targets, our new understanding of the climatic consequences of nuclear war makes it clear that even a "limited" use of these weapons would lead to an unprecedented disaster for the rest of us.

During the Cold War, there was widespread understanding that a large-scale nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union would endanger the entire world. That understanding, along with the appreciation that nuclear war was a real and immediate threat, helped foster a significant civil society movement that was able to pressure the leadership of the nuclear superpowers to stop and then reverse the arms race. Progress was made, but the job was incomplete.

Many of the 70,000 nuclear weapons that existed at the height of the Cold War have been dismantled, but more than 17,000 remain. And while the danger remains, understanding of their terrible destructive power has faded from our consciousness.

New Hope in a Growing Movement

Two generations have come of age since the fall of the Berlin Wall, two generations who have never been taught about the true destructive potential of nuclear weapons. The world is understandably concerned about the use of chemical weapons, but these pale in comparison to the ecocidal nature of nuclear weapons. People who lived through the Cold War, including many policy makers in nuclear weapon states, act as if they have largely forgotten what will happen if these weapons are used, and most are completely unfamiliar with the new climate and agricultural data on limited nuclear war.

Fortunately, there is hope! There is a growing movement to promote understanding of the consequences of nuclear war and of the need to make these consequences the starting point from which future nuclear policy flows. The meeting in Oslo, the Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament, and the High Level Meeting of the U.N. General Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament are helping to maintain the focus on what these weapons truly mean for the future of humanity. Those present at the High Level Meeting, held on September 26, 2013, called over and over for immediate and sustained progress on nuclear abolition. Ms. Angela Kane, U.N. High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, has highlighted the humanitarian consequences in her speeches and believes that this topic has "profoundly shaped how nuclear weapons are discussed today."

The diplomatic momentum will continue at an upcoming meeting in Mexico from February 13-14, 2014, the follow-up to the Oslo meeting. We encourage the United States and the other nuclear powers to attend and to use this important forum to further build international support for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The time is now to ban such weapons, and to agree to a protocol for their abolition.

The disarmament community must disseminate information about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war and promote further research to complete our understanding

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We wish everyone a peaceful new year.

Disarmament Times Melissa J. Gillis, editor

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Homer A. Jack founded Disarmament Times in 1978.

of the dangers we face. In addition to broadening our knowledge of the ecologic and climatic effects in other countries, researching the very real risk of accidental nuclear war will provide further evidence that we are living on borrowed time.

Physicians are sworn by oath to heal, and when healing is not possible, to prevent illness and suffering. Our only special interest is the welfare of our patients. We now know that that welfare is intricately connected to the health and survival of our interdependent ecosystem. We all must be physicians to the planet. Nuclear weapons pose the most grievous threat to our survival.

The revitalized movement to eliminate nuclear weapons begun in 2005 now brings together physicians and all members of civil society. It has a real chance of changing the paradigm and ending the nuclear status quo. It is our hope that when the global community becomes informed of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons it will again rise up and demand that nuclear weapons be eliminated. The new science tells us that we cannot accept a partial victory. Our survival depends on the eradication of this ecocidal threat.

Dr. Andrew Kanter is immediate past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility and co-regional vice president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Dr. Ira Helfand is co-president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and a past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility. He is also author of the *Nuclear Famine* report.

The second edition of *Nuclear Famine* is available from International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War at <http://www.ippnw.org/pdf/nuclear-famine-two-billion-at-risk-2013.pdf>

Notes

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Panel Discussion: Steps Toward a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone

VIEW ONLINE at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8ahFK7pw68>

Co-sponsored by the **NGO COMMITTEE ON DISARMAMENT, PEACE & SECURITY**, 9 October 2013

Moderator **Randy Rydell** (U.N.), speakers: **Dr. Mohamed Shaker** (Egypt), **Frank von Hippel** (Princeton University), **Emad Kiyaei** (Iran, Princeton University), and **Hillel Schenker** (Co-editor, Israel-Palestine Journal).

A transcript of Frank von Hippel's presentation, "Fissile Material Controls in the Middle East," is available by emailing contact@fissilematerials.org

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