

67th session of the United Nations General Assembly First Committee

Joint Statement on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament

New York, 22 October 2012

Mr Chair,

I am taking the floor on behalf of the 34 Member States Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Peru, the Philippines, Samoa, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Thailand, Uruguay, Zambia, and Switzerland, as well as the Observer State Holy See.

Our countries are deeply concerned about the humanitarian consequences that any use of nuclear weapons would have. We welcome the increased attention that this issue has received over the last few years. The 2010 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons expressed its *“deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons”* and reaffirmed *“the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law”*. We feel encouraged that consideration of this issue has garnered greater prominence in a number of General Assembly resolutions and in other fora since 2010.

Mr Chair,

Serious concerns related to the humanitarian implications of nuclear weapons have been voiced repeatedly. When the horrific consequences of their use became apparent in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) took a clear position calling for the abolition of these weapons of “extermination”.

The sheer horror of the use of nuclear weapons informed the very first resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 and was later reflected in key multilateral documents. The NPT Preamble refers to 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”*. 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*. Several decades after their adoption, these expressions of concern are as pertinent as ever and will remain so for as long as nuclear weapons remain.

If such weapons were to be used, be it intentionally or accidentally, immense humanitarian consequences would be unavoidable. As the ICRC has already concluded, international organisations providing emergency relief would be unable to fulfill their mandates. In addition to the immediate fatalities, survivors of the horrendous effects of a nuclear explosion would endure immeasurable suffering. Studies have shown that the radiation released by even a single nuclear weapon would affect populations, agriculture and natural resources over a very wide area and also constitute a very real threat for future generations. Further studies conclude that even a “limited nuclear exchange” – in itself a

contradiction in terms – would cause a global climate change with such a serious and long-lasting impact on the environment and food production that it could cause a global famine affecting over a billion people.

Mr Chair,

Nuclear weapons have the destructive capacity to pose a threat to the survival of humanity and as long as they continue to exist the threat to humanity will remain. This, in addition to the perceived political value and prestige attached by some States to these weapons, are factors that encourage proliferation and non-compliance with international obligations. Moreover, it is of great concern that, even after the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation remains part of the 21st century international security environment.

The utility of these instruments of mass destruction in confronting traditional security challenges has been rightly questioned by many States as well as by civil society experts. Moreover, nuclear weapons are useless in addressing current challenges such as poverty, health, climate change, terrorism or transnational crime. In times of decreasing funds available for social welfare, health care or education, using vast financial resources each year for the retention, modernisation and expansion of nuclear arsenals would appear to be at odds with our collective responsibility in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. The choice should be clear.

Mr Chair,

The grave humanitarian concerns resulting from the unique destructive capacity and uncontrollable effects in space and time of nuclear weapons also raise important legal issues. All rules of international humanitarian law apply fully to nuclear weapons, notably the rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution, as well as the prohibition on causing superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering and the prohibition against causing widespread, severe and long-term damage to the environment. In November last year, the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement adopted a Resolution emphasizing not only the incalculable human suffering resulting from any use of nuclear weapons but also stressing that it is difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law.

Mr Chair,

It is of utmost importance that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances. The only way to guarantee this is the total, irreversible and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons, under effective international control, including through the full implementation of Article VI of the NPT. All States must intensify their efforts to outlaw nuclear weapons and achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. Civil society plays a crucial role in raising the awareness about the devastating humanitarian consequences as well as the critical IHL implications of nuclear weapons.

The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons concern the community of States as a whole. Accordingly, the United Nations General Assembly has a particularly important role in addressing this matter in a comprehensive fashion.

Thank you for your attention.