

**IPPNW, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War**

**Online World Conference**

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I have the honor of speaking on behalf of IPPNW, *International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War*, the founding member group of ICAN, the *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*.

We are living in challenging times. In the midst of a global health and economic crisis that has the world in lockdown, we are coming to terms with several harsh realities, including the vulnerability of the current global system. We must be clear, however, that although a virus sparked this crisis, it is political in origin, not biological. It stems from governments dismissing and ignoring the warnings made by scientists and medical professionals throughout the world.

The most important lesson that society must learn from this pandemic is that science must not be ignored. And science has, time and again, issued detailed warnings regarding nuclear weapons. With nuclear weapons, however, the stakes are much higher.

Healthcare professionals have, for decades, outlined the humanitarian consequences of nuclear detonations and pointed out the risks inherent to existing nuclear arsenals.

The devastation caused by these uniquely destructive weapons would involve both space and time. Cities would become inaccessible and uninhabitable for long periods of time, and the atrocious effects of acute and chronic radiation would not only affect survivors throughout their lives -with various cancers and chronic illnesses- but also their progeny, who will have a high risk of severe genetic and birth defects, as well as a higher risk of cancer. There is no possibility of first response, as most healthcare workers will have died, most hospitals, clinics and communication infrastructure will have been destroyed, and radiation will make it impossible for external first responders to aid the victims of a nuclear detonation. Victims with injuries, burns and the painful manifestations of acute radiation syndrome will be left to suffer and die alone. Moreover, a high-altitude nuclear explosion would create an electromagnetic pulse that would disrupt most electrical devices within a radius far greater than the physical devastation from the nuclear blast, causing widespread failure of automobiles, computers, telephones, and telecommunications. The world, as we know it, would radically change.

Climate scientists have determined that a “limited” nuclear war -one caused by 100 Hiroshima-sized nuclear weapons detonated in cities in a war between India and Pakistan- would not only cause several million deaths and injuries, but that the soot and debris that rise to the atmosphere will rapidly reduce the temperature in the biosphere, affecting the production of staple grains -rice, wheat, corn and soy- resulting in a famine that would kill around 2 billion people worldwide, mostly from economically-challenged countries, many of them far away from where the original conflict took place. The scarcity of food supplies and the ensuing price speculation, will increase the likelihood of armed conflicts and perhaps, even a full-scale nuclear war which, aside from killing dozens of millions of people, will generate a nuclear winter through which many species, maybe even our own, could become extinct.

Recovery from a full-scale nuclear war would be impossible. The only sensible path is to prevent it.

Scientists have also told us that the risk that this will occur is ever greater. The Doomsday Clock, created by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists as a symbolic clock that measures a global man-made catastrophe in minutes to midnight, marks, for 2020, 100 seconds to midnight, the highest risk in history. This is mainly due to the fiery rhetoric of leaders of nuclear countries and the ease with which they make nuclear threats, the growing climate crisis and its potential for generating and aggravating conflict, and the ever-growing risk of accidental nuclear detonations and technological warfare.

Over 1000 accidents have been recorded with the US nuclear arsenal alone, 6 of which have nearly resulted in nuclear war. Of the nearly 14,000 nuclear warheads in the current global arsenal, approximately 1,800 remain in a state of high alert, pointing at cities, ready to be detonated within minutes. The high technological dependence makes high-alert systems vulnerable to cyberattacks, and to human and technical error. This risk is so great that scientists in the Future of Life Institute have determined that the most likely nuclear war is an accidental one. If we are alive today, it is due to luck rather than to good management of these arsenals. If we are not willing to bet that this luck will last forever, then we must work actively towards eliminating the nuclear threat, and we must do so urgently.

As weapons, nuclear weapons are not practical. Their effects cannot be controlled. They do not respect borders. They are not made to destroy military targets, but to destroy cities and kill many civilians. Using them would be a suicidal act, so they cannot really be used in warfare. The sole reason for possessing them is the threat they represent, the semantic charge behind the words “nuclear power” and “nuclear deterrence”. Nuclear weapons thus function, in this sense, as a symbol, the construction of which has been supported and maintained, not only by the nine nuclear weapon states and their allies, but by the entire world. Until recently.

On July 7th, 2017 at the UN in New York, 122 countries, a clear majority of the international community, voted in favor of adopting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the TPNW. This treaty prohibits the development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. This is the product of the collective empowerment of non-nuclear weapon states and of them assuming an active role as stake holders in the nuclear weapons issue. This refreshing new way of conducting international politics -coined by Costa Rica as the democratization of nuclear disarmament- fosters cooperation and strengthens the multilateral regime, necessary ingredients to effectively face humanity’s pressing challenges.

Moreover, the TPNW aims to stigmatize nuclear weapons through prohibition, a strategy that history has proven to be effective and the process by which all other weapons of mass destruction -chemical, biological, landmines and cluster munitions- have been abolished. Currently, there are no states boasting of being chemical weapons powers or of using biological weapons in their security doctrines. This is because a strong international norm and a climate of moral condemnation have been effective in making these claims taboo. And this is precisely how this treaty is already starting to take effect, even before its entry into force.

Nowadays, power and prestige are less associated to destructive power, impositions and threats, and ever more associated to the ability to create dialogue, build bridges and come to agreements. The threat of imminent nuclear war makes less sense than ever right now, and, in light of the world’s current crisis, spending the yearly sum of 116 billion dollars in the maintenance and modernization of the world’s nuclear arsenal is beyond ludicrous. It is urgent to give peace a chance. It is urgent to move towards nuclear disarmament and ban nuclear weapons.

The failure to face the threat posed by COVID-19 turned out to be disastrous, but the continued negligence of governments in similarly ignoring the nuclear threat will be far worse. The silver lining with this pandemic is that humanity has a chance to finally open its eyes to the warnings of science, to the latent risk of catastrophe that we are in, and to the urgent need for cooperation and peace. Our plea to policy makers is to be of the side of science, evidence and common sense. The alternative, as we now know all too well, is catastrophic.