

**Civil society statement to the UN high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament
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Delivered by Nosizwe Lise Baqwa of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) on behalf of civil society

The use of a nuclear weapon on a major populated area would immediately kill tens if not hundreds of thousands of people—women, men, and children.

Hundreds of thousands more would be alive—but severely injured. Blinded, burned, crushed. The immediate effects of even a single nuclear weapon are shocking and overwhelming. Its destructive force capable of nightmarish scenes of death and despair. Of suffering. They go far beyond what is considered acceptable, even in the context of war.

The blinding flash will leave people sightless; the massive blast will level cities; the searing heat and spreading fires will melt steel and engulf homes, and can coalesce into a firestorm that will suck the air from anyone still breathing.

And the survivors of these physical traumas may yet be poisoned by radioactivity, which invades and destroys their bodies over the days and weeks that follow.

In addition to this, there are significant long-term impacts of a nuclear weapons explosion.

A single nuclear weapon will cause devastating damage to infrastructure, critical industry, to our livelihoods and to our lives. The lives of fathers, of mothers, of grandparents; the lives of our children. The long-term effects of exposure to radiation will lead to increased incidence of leukemia and solid cancers among survivors, and a heightened risk of hereditary effects for future generations. Their use would result in large-scale forced or voluntary migration—floods of refugees into neighboring countries, who would be unable to return home for decades, if ever. A nuclear weapons explosion will affect the environment and agricultural production for decades to come.

If multiple nuclear weapons were used, the combined effects of their firestorms would seriously disrupt the global climate, causing widespread agricultural collapse and famine that could blight the lives of millions. Global communications and electrical and electronic systems would be disrupted. An extensive nuclear exchange would produce temperatures lower than the last ice age.

The effects will spread beyond borders, to areas far away from where the bombs were dropped.

There will be a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable people around the world: those without enough food; those without access to health care, water, and education; those who are already suffering from the lack of resources.

The Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in Oslo held in March this year, concluded that it would not be possible to coordinate and deliver any meaningful humanitarian response, to a catastrophe brought about by nuclear weapons. No international organization or state could adequately deal with the situation.

Any use of nuclear weapons would eradicate hospitals, food, water and medical supplies, transportation and communications—infrastructure required for the treatment of survivors.

Physicians and paramedics arriving from outside would have to work without resources needed for effective treatment; furthermore, radiation, as we know from both Chernobyl and Fukushima, can make it impossible for rescuers to enter highly contaminated areas.

There are still many aspects of the impact of nuclear weapons that are rarely discussed. We look forward to the upcoming conference in Mexico next year, where we hope all governments will continue to engage in a fact-based discussion around the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The horror that these weapons threaten is stark.

That nuclear weapons have not already been clearly declared illegal for all, alongside the other prohibited weapons of mass destruction, is a failure of our collective social responsibility.

The time has come for committed states to correct that failure. The time has come to ban nuclear weapons once and for all.

The current framework provided for multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations has not been able to overcome the lack of political will of nuclear-armed states to comply with their obligations to disarm. Let us not allow deadlocks in meetings to be the legacy we leave behind us, for our children.

A treaty banning nuclear weapons is achievable. It can be initiated by states that do not possess nuclear weapons. Nuclear-armed states should not be allowed to prevent such negotiations. We should not abandon productive or promising efforts in other forums, but neither should we ignore the opportunity that lies before us now, to make history.

History shows that legal prohibitions of weapon systems—of their use or their possession—facilitate their elimination. Weapons that have been outlawed increasingly become seen as illegitimate. They lose their political status, and so do not continue compelling money and resources to be invested in their production, modernisation, proliferation, and perpetuation.

The ban on nuclear weapons will raise the political and economic costs of maintaining them, by prohibiting assistance with the development, production, or testing of nuclear weapon systems.

The new treaty will perhaps be the most important tool in our collective work towards eliminating nuclear weapons, and this tool can actually be achieved now.

It will take courage. It will take the leadership by states free of nuclear weapons. And you will have the support of civil society. My name is Nosizwe Lise Baqwa and I am a campaigner from ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Campaigners like me, from all around the world, are demanding action to finally achieve the outlawing and elimination of nuclear weapons. It is time. It is time to change the status quo. It is time we ban nuclear weapons.