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Nobel Peace Prize Goes to Group Opposing Nuclear Weapons

By [RICK GLADSTONE](#) OCT. 6, 2017



Beatrice Fihn, executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, and Daniel Hogsta, a coordinator, celebrating in Geneva after the group was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday. Credit Denis Balibouse/Reuters

In a year when threats from nuclear weapons seemed to draw closer, the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) was awarded on Friday to an advocacy group behind the first treaty to prohibit them.

The group, [the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#), a Geneva-based coalition of disarmament activists, was honored for its efforts to advance the negotiations that led to the treaty, which was [reached in July](#) at the United Nations.

The organization is receiving the award for its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its groundbreaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said in a statement.

The choice amounted to a blunt rejoinder to the world's nine nuclear-armed powers and their allies, which [boycotted the negotiations](#). Some denounced the treaty as a naive and dangerous diversion.

It also represented a moment of vindication for the members of the winning organization, known by its acronym ICAN, and for the United Nations diplomats who were responsible for completing the treaty negotiations.

“This prize is a tribute to the tireless efforts of many millions of campaigners and concerned citizens worldwide who, ever since the dawn of the atomic age, have loudly protested nuclear weapons, insisting that they can serve no legitimate purpose and must be forever banished from the face of our earth,” ICAN said in [a statement](#).

The United States, which with Russia has the biggest stockpile of nuclear weapons, had said that the treaty would do nothing to alleviate the possibility of nuclear conflict and might even increase it.

The committee acknowledged the view held by nuclear-armed countries in its statement, noting that “an international legal prohibition will not in itself eliminate a single nuclear weapon, and that so far neither the states that already have nuclear weapons nor their closest allies support the nuclear weapon ban treaty.”

Despite those admonitions, at least 53 member states of the United Nations have signed the treaty since a ceremony to start the ratification process was held at the General Assembly on Sept. 20. Delegates representing two-thirds of the General Assembly's 193 members participated in the treaty negotiations.

“We have received this news with so much joy,” Elayne Whyte Gómez, the Costa Rican ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, who was the chairwoman of the negotiations, said in a telephone interview. “Every year there should be at least one happy event to give us hope, and this was it.”

She said ICAN’s work “represented efforts by civil society activists who approached governments around the world and maintained the momentum of the negotiations to keep them going.”

Dr. Ira Helfand, a disarmament activist and board member of the Physicians for Social Responsibility, one of ICAN’s founders, called it “a powerful voice reminding us all of the urgent need to ban and eliminate these weapons as the only reliable way to make sure they are not used.”

The prize came as a surprise to Beatrice Fihn, the executive director of ICAN, which has a three-person office in Geneva. She said at a news conference that she had thought at first that the congratulatory phone call from the Nobel committee was fake.

The treaty will go into effect 90 days after 50 United Nations member states have formally ratified it. As of Friday, three - Guyana, the Vatican and Thailand - had done so.

Under the agreement, all nuclear weapons use, threat of use, testing, development, production, possession, transfer and stationing in a different country are prohibited.

For nuclear-armed nations that choose to join, the treaty outlines a process for destroying stockpiles and enforcing the countries’ promise to remain free of nuclear weapons.

“I don’t think we have unrealistic expectations that tomorrow nuclear weapons will be gone,” Ms. Fihn said. “But I think this is really a moment to be really inspired that it is possible to do something.”

The prize came against the backdrop of the most serious worries about a possible nuclear conflict since the Cold War, punctuated by a bellicose standoff between the United States and North Korea.

The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, has defied United Nations sanctions prohibiting his isolated country’s repeated nuclear weapons and missile testing, and he has threatened to strike the American heartland with the “nuclear sword of justice.”



The signing ceremony at the United Nations in New York last month for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Credit Don Emmert/Agence France-Presse Getty Images

President Trump, who has mocked Mr. Kim by calling him “[Little Rocket Man](#),” has said he would have no choice but to “totally destroy” North Korea if the United States or its allies are attacked.

Berit Reiss-Andersen, chairwoman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, told reporters that the award was not intended to send a message directly to Mr. Trump. “We’re not kicking anyone in the legs with this prize,” she said. The committee instead intended to give “encouragement to all players in the field” to disarm.

Ms. Fihn was more direct in her appraisal of the Kim-Trump standoff and the anxieties it has raised. “Nuclear weapons do not bring stability and security,” she told reporters. “We can see that right now.”

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