2015 UNGA First Committee

Nuclear Weapons Cluster

Statement on behalf of the Humanitarian Initiative on Nuclear Weapons

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to the United Nations Office at Geneva
Mr. Chairman,

I have the honour to present the Summary of Findings of the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons that took place from 8 to 9 December 2014. 158 States, the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, civil society organisations and academia participated in the conference that began with messages of the UN Secretary General, Pope Francis and the President of the ICRC. Testimonies given by Hibakusha and victims of the effects of nuclear testing exemplified the unspeakable suffering caused to ordinary civilians by nuclear weapons.

The Vienna conference built upon the fact-based discussions at the previous conferences held in Oslo and Nayarit. The key conclusions from the substantive sessions included the following:

1. The impact of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective of the cause, would not be constrained by national borders and could have regional and even global consequences, causing destruction, death and displacement as well as profound and long-term damage to the environment, climate, human health and well-being, socioeconomic development, social order and could even threaten the survival of humankind.

2. The scope, scale and interrelationship of the humanitarian consequences caused by nuclear weapon detonation are catastrophic and more complex than commonly understood. These consequences can be large scale and potentially irreversible.

3. The use and testing of nuclear weapons have demonstrated their devastating immediate, mid- and long-term effects. Nuclear testing in several parts of the world has left a legacy of serious health and environmental consequences. Radioactive contamination from these tests disproportionately affects women and children. It contaminated food supplies and continues to be measurable in the atmosphere to this day.

4. As long as nuclear weapons exist, there remains the possibility of a nuclear weapon explosion. Even if the probability is considered low, given the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation, the risk is unacceptable. The risks of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional use of nuclear weapons are evident due to the vulnerability of nuclear command and control networks to human error and cyberattacks, the maintaining of nuclear arsenals on high levels of alert, forward deployment and their modernization. These risks increase over time. The dangers of access to nuclear weapons and related materials by non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups, persist.
5. There are many circumstances in which nuclear weapons could be used in view of international conflicts and tensions, and against the background of the current security doctrines of States possessing nuclear weapons. As nuclear deterrence entails preparing for nuclear war, the risk of nuclear weapon use is real. Opportunities to reduce risk must be taken now, such as de-alerting and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines. Limiting the role of nuclear weapons to deterrence does not remove the possibility of their use. Nor does it address the risks stemming from accidental use. The only assurance against the risk of a nuclear weapon detonation is the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

6. No state or international body could address in an adequate manner the immediate humanitarian emergency or long-term consequences caused by a nuclear weapon detonation in a populated area, nor provide adequate assistance to those affected. Such capacity is unlikely ever to exist. Coordinated preparedness may nevertheless be useful in mitigating the effects including of a terrorist event involving the explosion of an improvised nuclear device. The imperative of prevention as the only guarantee against the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use was highlighted.

7. Looking at nuclear weapons from a number of different legal angles, it is clear that there is no comprehensive legal norm universally prohibiting possession, transfer, production and use. International environmental law remains applicable in armed conflict and can pertain to nuclear weapons, although it does not specifically regulate these arms. Likewise, international health regulations would cover effects of nuclear weapons. The new evidence that has emerged in the last two years about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons casts further doubt on whether these weapons could ever be used in conformity with international humanitarian law. As was the case with torture, which defeats humanity and is now unacceptable to all, the suffering caused by nuclear weapons use is not only a legal matter, it necessitates moral appraisal.

8. The catastrophic consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation event and the risks associated with the mere existence of these weapons raise profound ethical and moral questions on a level transcending legal discussions and interpretations.

Thank you for your attention.