Statement by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)

UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security
12 October 2016

Honorable Chair and Members of the First Committee,

I take the floor on behalf of ICAN—the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons—a global campaign coalition comprising 440 partner organizations in 98 countries. ICAN fully supports the resolution tabled by Mexico, Austria, Ireland, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa, calling for negotiations to commence in 2017 on a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination.

This resolution is the logical, practical, and appropriate outcome of a humanitarian initiative that has rapidly gained momentum in a few short years. The large majority of UN member states has now concluded that the only way to prevent the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons and nuclear war is to prohibit and eliminate the weapons themselves.

Indisputable medical, environmental, and humanitarian evidence supporting this conclusion was presented in painstaking detail and was carefully evaluated at three international conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons—conferences in which the majority of UN Member States participated, along with international organizations and civil society experts. A Humanitarian Pledge to bring all relevant stakeholders together in work to stigmatize, prohibit, and eliminate nuclear weapons, and to fill the legal gap in nuclear disarmament, was launched after the Vienna conference and has now been joined by 127 states. Many others have endorsed its goals.

The process reached a critical juncture this year, when the Open-Ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament, established by the First Committee and the General Assembly in 2015, considered this evidence once again and engaged in thoughtful discussions about how to act on it. The OEWG recommended, by an overwhelming majority, that the UN mandate negotiations on a treaty to explicitly prohibit the acquisition, possession, stockpiling, development, testing, and production of nuclear weapons, along with all preparations for their deployment and use.
The First Committee resolution that has emerged from this humanitarian initiative fundamentally changes the political dynamic around nuclear disarmament in two significant ways.

First, it places consequences at the centre of the debate and rejects the strategic and political rationales offered by a few states for retaining nuclear weapons indefinitely. Weapons that can destroy an entire city with a single detonation, that can kill tens of millions of people in a matter of hours, that can continue to sicken and kill across generations through exposure to ionizing radiation, and that can profoundly and irreparably damage the global climate, belong in no one’s hands for whatever reason. The primary reason that is still given by a few states—deterrence—is, from the humanitarian perspective, a threat to inflict these unacceptable consequences in full knowledge that no political or strategic outcome can justify them. Moreover, once nuclear weapons are abolished, there will be no nuclear threat left to deter. The ban treaty puts an end to the circular reasoning that has left disarmament in a holding pattern for far too long.

Second, the resolution for a negotiating mandate shifts leadership on nuclear disarmament away from the nuclear-armed states and those who claim to rely on nuclear weapons for their security. This shift is both appropriate and necessary. The UN, the World Court, the NPT, and those of us in civil society take it as a given that nuclear disarmament is the responsibility of all states, not just those who possess nuclear weapons. Yet the nuclear-armed states, over decades, have insisted that nuclear disarmament must happen on their terms, on their schedule, and according to a process that they determine is in their strategic interests. We have seen the result: decades of promises, postponements, half steps, reversals, and a horizon that recedes ever farther into the distance. Not only are the nuclear-armed states reneging on their disarmament commitments, they are spending hundreds of billions of dollars to re-equip their arsenals with new warheads, new delivery systems, and new nuclear infrastructure.

The non-nuclear-armed states have said enough, with good cause. Along with civil society, they have rejected arguments for retaining nuclear weapons that place the strategic interests of a handful of states above the security interests of all states and all people. We have heard from the nuclear-armed states and their dependents in extended deterrence relationships that they oppose the ban treaty because it fails to take the security dimension of nuclear weapons into account. They are not only being disingenuous in this claim, they are also simply wrong. The ban treaty is first and foremost about the security of all states threatened by the consequences of nuclear weapons, including the nuclear-armed states.

We have also heard arguments from ban treaty opponents that a ban is not comprehensive, not verifiable, and not enforceable. These are diversionary claims. The ban treaty for which ICAN is campaigning will certainly be comprehensive, in that it will prohibit all aspects of nuclear weapons, from possession through use. The ban treaty itself does not have to be verifiable, because its purpose is to establish a norm that requires the elimination of nuclear weapons through subsequent measures that will include verification provisions.
Finally, questioning the ban treaty’s enforceability is nothing more than misdirection. An explicit, negotiated prohibition, signed and ratified by the vast majority of UN Member States, will be a powerful tool in the hands of those States that honestly want a nuclear-weapons-free world and are prepared to assert leadership to get there. The nuclear-armed States understand this. The ban treaty will impose a very narrow choice upon them: to accept the judgment of the international community that nuclear weapons are illegitimate and must be eliminated without further delay or prevarication, or to accept a new status as outlaws and pariahs. ICAN believes this is the real reason for their opposition. While we agree that the next steps will require engagement with the nuclear-armed States, the ban treaty will change the terms of that engagement in ways that are much more conducive to real nuclear disarmament.

ICAN expects that the new treaty emerging from these negotiations will be a non-discriminatory international legal instrument that will declare a comprehensive prohibition on all aspects of nuclear weapons, that will establish an obligation for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and a framework to achieve it, and that will include positive obligations, such as ensuring the rights of victims and survivors of nuclear weapons, including nuclear testing victims, and requiring actions to address damage to affected environments.

ICAN is ready to work side by side with governments and international organizations as a partner in this process, and looks forward to contributing to its successful outcome.

Anyone who fully understands and appreciates the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons also understands that the risk of those consequences must be reduced to zero. That can only be accomplished by reducing the number of nuclear weapons to zero. We don’t have the luxury of waiting until the nuclear-armed States find disarmament convenient. ICAN urges the First Committee to take decisive action in this session, by establishing a mandate to negotiate prohibition now, with elimination to follow in short order.

Thank you.