The theme of this year’s World Humanitarian Day, held on 19 August, was “civilians are not a target”.

Picture a neighbourhood filled with homes providing comfort and safe haven, surrounded by bustling markets and shops, schools, playgrounds, hospitals, and factories. Weeks later, what is left is a collection of bombed-out structures in the middle of a war zone. All essential infrastructure and semblance of normal life have been destroyed. The use of wide-area explosives has left vast damage and destruction, causing profound and long-lasting consequences for people’s safety, livelihood, and basic needs, like food, water, and electric/fuel power. This often leaves people little choice but to flee to safer regions, often exposing them to new dangers.1

Millions of people are facing this reality every day. The use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which is one of the topics covered in this briefing book (see chapter 5), has wrecked havoc around the world. Since this time last year, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed, injured, displaced, or suffer from chronic food shortages, health crises, and sexual violence. Aleppo, Mosul, Raqqa, and other cities around the world have been bombed relentlessly into devastation.

This is a grave reality. Humanitarian disasters due to conflict—particularly those fought in urban settings—are on the rise and while the states or armed groups involved in creating these disasters are sometimes condemned (though rarely brought to account), the weapons that fuel these disasters continue to flood the most affected regions. The major weapon manufacturers and exporters make profits while blood and rubble fills the streets of cities abroad. The guns and the bombs that destroy lives, homes, and hospitals represent dollar signs to their traders and devastation to their victims.

This is where First Committee comes in. UN agencies like the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) or the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights are lending their voices to the campaign to protect civilians. But where is the UN General Assembly’s core disarmament forum? What can it do to actually prevent violence by dealing, in a real way, with the weapons that are sustaining the wars?

It is not impossible for First Committee to have a real impact. We should be riding high right now on a recent—and rare—success. We banned nuclear weapons. On 7 July, 122 countries voted in favour of a new legally binding instrument that prohibits nuclear weapons. This effort was an initiative of First Committee—the resolution adopted last October led to the negotiations that led to this treaty.

This treaty makes the possession of these horrific weapons of mass destruction illegal, along with other related activities such as testing, using, developing, or assisting with nuclear weapons (which includes financing or planning to use the weapons, among...
other things). The treaty also includes provisions for assisting victims of nuclear weapons use and testing, and environmental remediation. It is the first treaty to recognise the disproportionate impact of nuclear weapons on indigenous people and on women.

Reaching this agreement is an amazing feat of collective action by people who came together to do something that had not been tried before. It is the result of decades of campaigning for the abolition of nuclear weapons and a concerted effort over the last several years of many governments that were willing to renew the discussion on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and take forward new legal and political processes to deal with the challenges of nuclear weapons.

As we always knew, this treaty has not magically eliminated nuclear weapons over night. But as atomic bomb survivor Setsuko Thurlow said in her remarkable closing statement to the negotiating conference on 7 July, “This is the beginning of the end of nuclear weapons.” This treaty was conceived of as a tool that could help change the politics and economics of nuclear weapons as a means of facilitating disarmament. It provides a solid foundation to change policies and practices, as well as to shift the thinking and discourse on nuclear weapons even further.

Like anything created by people, this treaty has its imperfections. But it’s a good start on the road to abolition, and it gives a glimpse of what is possible in this world. That, all on its own, has meaning. In her book Hope in the Dark, author and activist Rebecca Solnit writes about “the slow incremental victories that begin in the imagination and change the rules.” Seeing them, she notes, “requires being able to recognize the shades of gray between black and white or maybe to see the world in full color.” The world is a mess and we have not yet figured out how to change everything all at once. Absolute “victory,” whatever that may be, continues to elude us. But we need to celebrate the ground we have taken. As Solnit argues, “being able to celebrate or at least recognize milestones and victories and keep working is what the times require of us.”

Keep working we must. This briefing book, written by civil society activists and experts, presents both challenges and suggested solutions for a number of issues related to weapons and war. The non-governmental organisations, coalitions, and campaigns participating most actively at First Committee have argued consistently that we can and must advance human security and social and economic justice through disarmament and arms control. We call for an approach to disarmament that is driven by the rights of people most affected by armed violence, not by the discretion of states and organisations most responsible for it.

The groups that have contributed to this briefing book work on many different issues and weapon systems from a variety of perspectives, but they all share one thing in common: the desire for more effective, transparent, and inclusive diplomatic work at the United Nations. We believe that most delegates seek true progress and the enhancement of human security. We hope that this briefing book will provide inspiration and alternatives as delegates engage in the important work ahead.

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