Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the State Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

Statement of the International Committee of the Red Cross
The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is grateful for the opportunity to address the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). We speak as the organization mandated by States to protect and assist the victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence, and to promote and strengthen international humanitarian law. It is the horrific suffering that the ICRC witnessed in Hiroshima, while supporting the Japanese Red Cross in assisting the victims of the atomic bombing, which led us in September 1945 to call on States to prohibit nuclear weapons, a call repeatedly made since then by the broader International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Movement’s ongoing concerns about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons were outlined at the Preparatory Committee’s first meeting in Vienna.

On Monday of this week, the President of the ICRC, Peter Maurer, issued an appeal to all States, global leaders and citizens calling for urgent action to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again. This Appeal called for the following 3 actions:

1. For States possessing nuclear weapons and their allies to urgently take measures to reduce and eventually eliminate the risk of nuclear weapon use.
2. For States Parties to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to use the 2020 Review Conference, and this Preparatory Committee meeting to change course, away from threats of use and modernization of nuclear arsenals and towards full implementation of commitments they made in 2010 and previously to nuclear arms reductions, risk reduction and other effective nuclear disarmament measures.
3. And finally, for States, if they have not already done so, to take the necessary steps to adhere to the 1972 NPT, the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and other nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation treaties to which they are not yet party and fully implement their provisions.

This Appeal was made against the backdrop of a world in which the risk of use of nuclear weapons seems to be rising. With previous restraints steadily falling away, and threats of use of nuclear weapons entering mainstream politics, we see a shift from a focus on non-use and elimination to making the use of nuclear weapons possible or more likely. Specifically,

- With military incidents involving nuclear States and their allies occurring with disturbing frequency, the danger of use of nuclear weapons may be greater today than during the cold war.
- As the UN Secretary General recently warned, the Security Council that "The cold war is back...but with a difference. The mechanisms and the safeguards to manage the risks of escalation that existed in the past no longer seem to be present".
- States possessing nuclear weapons have plans for adapting nuclear weapons in ways that will make them able to be used in a wider variety of contexts and in parallel, their command and control systems have become more vulnerable to cyber-attacks.

In the view of the ICRC, concerted steps towards reducing nuclear risks are urgently needed and the only sound course of action is prevention. The 2020 NPT Review Conference is a crucial opportunity to make concrete progress to reduce the risks, advance nuclear disarmament and implement long-standing risk reduction commitments as a matter of urgency. Measures that would go far to achieving these goals include
- Unequivocal commitments never to use nuclear weapons first.
  - Removal of nuclear weapons from "hair trigger" alert status.
  - Pre-notification of military exercises that may involve nuclear weapons and of the launch of missiles.
  - Re-establishment of joint early-warning centers to clarify in real-time unexpected and potentially destabilising events.
  - Steps to progressively reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policies.

To be clear, the ICRC understands that all States and, in particular those engaged in conflicts in volatile areas of the world, face complex security challenges, including risks to their security and that of their allies. However, in some cases, the existence of nuclear weapons and the "security" benefits attributed to them are root causes of the tensions themselves. Yet the introduction of nuclear weapons and threats of their use only renders such tensions and conflicts more dangerous and increases the risk of a global conflagration in which much of humanity will suffer irreparably.

Ultimately, the only way to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again is to prohibit and eliminate them. With the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 122 States have sent an unambiguous message that nuclear weapons are considered unacceptable, incompatible with fundamental rules of international humanitarian law and deserving of a prohibition that is global in its scope. In the view of the ICRC, this message complements and supports the goals of the NPT and reflects the implementation of Article VI.

As the Appeal of the ICRC President emphasized “Seldom has collective action to reduce nuclear weapon risks and move towards their elimination been more urgent.” The ICRC urges every NPT State Party to work tirelessly to move the world away from the increasingly dangerous course we are on, to prevent these horrific weapons from ever being used again and to achieve their complete elimination in accordance with both the NPT and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.