74th Hiroshima and Nagasaki Commemoration
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Thank you for the invitation to speak today in my hometown, on a day of great meaning and horror.

We are here today on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples.

I believe this is important to remember as we mark the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 74 years ago. Because I think there are connections between the fact that we are on stolen Indigenous land here, and the bombings in Japan in 1945, and the racist violence that we are seeing today. Those connections include patriarchy, white supremacy, and the ideology of power through violence.

The atomic bomb has always been about power.

The men who made and first used the bomb spoke about these objects as being as powerful as the sun or as gods.

To this day, those in charge of nuclear weapons policy and planning in the US refer to themselves as the “nuclear priesthood”. The patriarchy and whiteness of this establishment is pretty absolute—women operating inside that system have talked about how they have to adopt the language and customs of the men who lead it in order to be accepted or seen as credible. And these are men who celebrate and perpetuate a certain kind of masculinity, in which their capacity for violence is the ultimate symbol of their strength, in which worrying about death and destruction and human suffering is portrayed as effeminate and weak.

We see this again and again when it comes to nuclear weapons. The cult of nuclear deterrence theory is based on patriarchal norms in which anyone challenging it is just being emotional, irrational, and ignorant of the realities of the world. This is a way to keep out diverse perspectives and experiences, to undermine anyone who challenges the dominance of those who plan for nuclear war and claim they are keeping us safe.

If you think also about the rhetoric around non-proliferation, about trying to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, the language is all about preventing “irrational” governments from getting these weapons, wanting to keep these weapons “in the right hands”. This is patriarchy and it’s also racism, which is another key component of nuclear weapons.
The idea that nuclear weapons are tools of racism or white supremacy is not to discount the fact that governments of nonwhite countries have nuclear weapons: a few do.

But it speaks to the currency of nuclear weapons as power, and that power being the capacity to commit acts of massive nuclear violence—to destroy cities, countries, our entire world.

Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy has said that nuclear weapons are the ultimate colonizer: they pervade our thinking, control our behaviour, administer our societies.

Nuclear weapons became, for a time, the pinnacle of power, granting admittance to an exclusive club (I’ll explain what I mean by “for a time” later).

But whichever nuclear weapon possessing government we’re talking about, the objectives and the effects are the same—colonial, racist, patriarchal control over populations and the Earth.

African-American civil rights leaders saw the connections between the atomic bomb, colonialism, institutionalized racism, and segregation—“each grew from the same seed and represented a form of violence”.

They understood how the willingness to use these weapons on Japan, to test them in Algeria, and the Pacific, and on Indigenous nations was an act of racism.

Between 1946 and 1996, well over 2000 nuclear tests have been conducted around the world.

The Western Shoshone in the southwestern United States is the most bombed nation on earth. 814 nuclear tests have been conducted on their land since 1951.

France, the United Kingdom, and the United States tested over 315 nuclear weapons on largely remote, rural, and First Nations communities across the Pacific.

In 2017 at the negotiations for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 35 indigenous groups delivered a statement:

Governments and colonial forces exploded nuclear bombs on our sacred lands—upon which we depend for our lives and livelihoods, and which contain places of critical cultural and spiritual significance—believing they were worthless…. We were never asked for, and we never gave, permission to poison our soil, food, rivers and oceans.

Today many of these communities continue their resistance against nuclear colonialism by fighting off nuclear waste disposal sites and uranium mines. Indigenous activists have also commented on the connection between the struggles of Water Protectors fighting the construction of pipelines and those fighting to keep uranium in the ground.
All of these elements show the inherent violence of nuclear weapons. Whether it is through the blast, firestorms, or the spread of radiation of the bomb exploding; whether it is through the mining or milling or storage of radioactive materials; or whether it is through the control, intimidation, threats, and fearmongering designed and executed by the policies of those who possess these bombs, nuclear weapons are above all else about violence.

They are not about safety or security.

They have killed hundreds of thousands of people and have the capacity to kill us all.

And in the meantime, the expense paid out for their development, maintenance, and upgrades are costing trillions of dollars to the detriment of everything that people and our planet actually need to survive and thrive.

This is yet another piece of the puzzle, and an important one—the wealth accumulated from nuclear weapons by a select few corporations and individuals at the expense of the many.

We’re told that nuclear weapon factories create jobs. But the weapons industry creates fewer jobs per dollar than the median manufacturing industry. One factor is the high level of technical expertise required; another is the high-cost of this skilled labour.

The Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory, for example, home to the Manhattan Project that created nuclear weapons, is still claimed to be a regional “job creator” and generator of “economic growth” in the state New Mexico in the United States. Yet as local activists point out, neither jobs nor sheer economic growth, which is often concentrated in a relatively few hands, are not reliable measures of broad economic benefit of the lab. New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the country, with high rates of drug abuse, poverty, school drop-out, childhood mortality rates—while scientists at Los Alamos drive around in fancy cars and go golfing in the desert.

The jobs argument, by the way, is the same one the Canadian government has used for selling weapons to Saudi Arabia—apparently a few thousand jobs in London, Ontario are more important than the lives of millions in Yemen or the rights of women in Saudi Arabia.

And while we’re here, where is Canada on the nuclear weapons question? Well, when the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was about to be negotiated, US President Obama instructed its allies in NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—to stay away from negotiations, and Canada complied with that instruction.

The Trudeau government has so far refused to sign or ratify the treaty, saying that while it respects the desire to get rid of nuclear weapons, Canada is part of NATO and NATO has a nuclear deterrence policy, relying on US bombs, and Canada doesn’t want to rock that boat. The government has also said that it prefers a “step by step” approach to nuclear
disarmament—the same approach of arms control treaties currently being dismantled by the United States and Russia.

All of this is connected. These ideologies of power through violence, of racism and white supremacy, of economic and technological prowess, of no longer being willing to be “constrained” by treaties, of the toxic brand of masculinity that says we’re not bound by law, we can do what we feel like, the masculinity that says we need weapons (whether guns or nuclear bombs) to be strong—these are all part of the real story about nuclear weapons, the story that we’re not allowed to talk about because we are just being emotional and irrational and we don’t really know what we’re talking about.

Well, I say enough to that patriarchal nonsense. Being told we can’t talk about racism or misogyny or institutionalised violence or human suffering is exactly what has gotten us to the point where white male supremacists are gunning down women and people of colour and queer folks every day in the United States and yet we can’t talk about white power, or toxic masculinities, or gun control. Its why people are in ICE concentration camps in the United States and why refugee camps are overflowing with people while Europe denies any accountability or responsibility for taking them in. Its why young Black men are so frequently subject to police brutality. Its why Indigenous communities continue to suffer from exploitation of the land and water and the other horrific legacies of settler colonial states, including Canada. Its why four young Congresswomen of colour in the United States are routinely threatened with rape or murder just for doing their jobs—just for existing.

If we don’t recognise that these same factors of racism, misogyny, and violence contribute to the cult of nuclear weapons, and if we aren’t willing to challenge these systems of thought and the economic and political policies that sustain them, then we are bound to not only see the indefinite possession of these weapons, but certainly we will seem them dropped once again on cities and communities.

But I believe in alternatives. I think we need to see the worst of our situation in order to build something better. Our efforts to understand the world can’t just stop with witnessing the darkest part of the human soul. We need to then challenge it, and work with others to change it.

This is why I said earlier that the idea that nuclear weapons bring power and prestige is “for a time”.

We are still in that time, but I choose to believe that time is limited, and that actually, that time is up.

I believe this for the following reasons:

1. Most of the world’s governments worked together to ban nuclear weapons. 122 countries voted for the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in
July 2017. This treaty outlaws nuclear weapons, making them illegal under international law. Like Setusko said, today Bolivia brought us to the halfway point in this treaty’s path to entry into force. 25 more to go, and I have great confidence in the team of ICAN activists around the world working to make this happen. And even before the treaty enters into force, it has already had a great impact. In the negotiations and in every signature and ratification of the treaty, we have seen governments of the world unite against nuclear weapons, speak about them as symbols of global injustice, and recognize the patriarchal and racist underpinnings of these weapons.

2. The work to get cities to support the nuclear ban, and to get financial institutions to divest money from these weapons, and to get parliamentarians and publics debating nuclear weapons once again has been growing. In Canada, BC is currently winning the cities appeal effort – they have North Saanich, Saanich, Vancouver, and Victoria signed up. Toronto has also joined (yay!). But work around the country remains to be done. It’s a great way to signal to the federal government that cities support the ban, but it can also have a practical element itself. In NYC for example we are working with city councillors on legislation that would divest all of NYC’s pension funds from nuclear weapons. So there’s a lot you can do to help in that regard. You can divest your own money, too. Check dontbankonthebomb.com to figure out where your money is going and how to get your bank to change. And this work isn’t just happening here, this is global – including in other countries that are part of NATO and that defend nuclear weapons, like Germany, Australia, Norway, and even nuclear weapon possessors like France, the UK, and the US! The internationalism of the antinuclear movement, invigorated by ICAN in recent years, is inspiring. Hiroshima Day events have been going on around the world starting our yesterday evening, starting in the Pacific and continuing in different time zones beyond ours. We can already read the speeches from some of those events and hear the echo of the words Never Again from survivors like Setusko and young activists committing to carry on this work.

3. I’m not just inspired by this renewed antinuclear activism. I’m inspired by renewed activism across the board – the climate activists, the gun control activists, anti-ICE protests. I’m inspired by survivors of school shootings who say Never Again and work to take down Senators that accept money from the NRA; I’m inspired by Jewish protestors saying Never Again as they blockade and shut down ICE facilities around the US. I’m inspired by the activists of colour and the Indigenous activists and the women and queer activists who keep teaching us about the root causes of our current state of the world and who keep showing us to confront it.

And I think that it is in this activism that we can continue to build our movement. Because the antinuclear movement cannot just be about abolishing nuclear weapons. Not if we understand nuclear weapons to be a part of the racist, patriarchal system that has led to the kind of institutionalised violence we face around the world today. If we can see that nuclear weapons are part of this system, we must confront them as such, and work with activists addressing the other key challenges of our time. This is not just about weapons. This is about ideology. This is
about whether or not we can as a human society live together in equality and justice and safety or if we cannot.

Despite all the evidence that we can’t, I still choose to believe that we can, and I am invigorated by witnessing the actions of others who believe the same, and who keep trying.

As well as Canadian I am also Irish – and we like to quote our poets. Seamus Heaney said, “hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is a good worth working for.”

So, on we go.