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BAN THE BOMB: DRAWING ATTENTION TO EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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A Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons also known as “Ban the Bomb Treaty” was passed at the United Nations on July 07, 2017. It opens for signatures on September 20, 2017 and would enter into legal force 90 days after being ratified by 50 countries. This is the first multilateral nuclear disarmament treaty to be concluded in more than 20 years. But is it a moment to signal that the era of nuclear weapons is coming to an end?

The objective of this new accord is to outlaw nuclear weapons use, threat of use, testing, development, production, possession, transfer and stationing in a different country. For nuclear-armed nations that choose to join, the treaty outlines a process for destroying stockpiles and for enforcing the country’s promise to remain free of nuclear weapons. But for now 122 countries who do not possess any nuclear weapons voted to ban the nuclear weapon. All nine nuclear powers, the U.S., Russia, Britain, China, France, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel, opposed the treaty and

boycotted the proceedings. Currently none of the nuclear armed States and the allies under nuclear deterrence doctrines have indicated that they would support the ban treaty.

Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power and the threat they pose to the environment and human survival. They release vast amounts of energy in the form of blast, heat and radiation. Several studies have concluded that no effective medical and humanitarian response is possible. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 showed that even a small nuclear weapon is destructive enough to destroy a city, and kill or injure tens of thousands of people. What would be the likely consequences of a nuclear attack in the 21st century? Experts say that a limited regional nuclear war could place up to 2 billion people at risk of starvation, and that a large-scale nuclear war would threaten the very survival of humanity.

Eliminating the nuclear threat has been high on the UN agenda since the organization’s

formation in 1945. But international efforts to advance this goal have yielded limited results. 22 years after the World Court's opinion and almost 50 years since the conclusion of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the nine nuclear states together possess approximately 15,395 weapons, with the U.S. and Russia accounting for more than 93 per cent of that total.¹ With over a thousand nuclear warheads remaining on high alert across the world and all nine nuclear-armed nations investing in the modernization of their nuclear arsenals, the doctrine of nuclear deterrence represents a high-risk gamble, which relies on the good sense of those we are trying to defend ourselves against.

Nuclear weapons cannot distinguish between military and civilian targets, or between combatants and non-combatants. Most of the casualties of a nuclear attack would inevitably be civilians. Once the explosive energy of a nuclear chain reaction has been released, it cannot be contained. People in neighbouring or even distant countries who have nothing to do with the conflict would suffer from the effects of radioactive fallout, even if they were at a safe distance from the blast and thermal destruction near ground zero. This disproportionate and indiscriminate destructiveness is considered by many to be a violation of international humanitarian law.

In fact the Ban treaty emerged from the attention drawn to the effects of use of nuclear

weapons by the Humanitarian Consequences initiative that started in 2013. The three inter-governmental conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons hosted by Norway in 2013 and Mexico and Austria in 2014 shed new light on the perils of living in a world armed to the brink with nuclear weapons. During the conferences extensive evidence was presented of the enormous 'humanitarian consequences' should nuclear weapons be ever used in wars. It also questioned the morality of threatening to kill so many people. Such evidences have been essential in helping to build support for this treaty among many governments.

Nuclear weapons are also an increasingly ineffective means of protecting our national security. They do not counter new forms of aggression such as cyber warfare, nor keep us safe from acts of terrorism. And they cannot be used to fight sea level rise, extreme weather, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, antimicrobial resistance or increasing social inequality. Nuclear weapons are expensive and wasteful, and contribute little to the economy. Under such circumstances, can human beings afford not to establish a verifiable and enforceable treaty that bans nuclear weapons outright?

Another catalytic force behind the pursuit of a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has been the voices of the hibakusha²,

or the survivors of the atomic bomb or literally “the people affected by explosion”. Survivors of the bombing and their children not only suffered ill health due to radiation exposure, but also were subjected to serious discrimination, mainly because of the ignorance on the effects of radiation sickness. In 1945, little was known about the effects of radioactive contamination, and rumors spread that radiation exposure was akin to an infectious disease. The survivors of the two bombings bore the legacy of terrible injuries and scars on top of the devastating trauma of what they witnessed. They also faced discrimination and ostracism, and many of them found it difficult to get employment or marry, since most people believed that radiation sickness is contagious and hereditary.³

The treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons will complement existing bans on other indiscriminate and inhumane weapons, and reinforce existing legal instruments on nuclear weapons, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty, regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, and the treaty banning nuclear test explosions. The new treaty will aim not only to advance nuclear disarmament, but also to help prevent further proliferation. However, it remains to be seen as to how much success it would actually achieve.

For now, dictates of common humanity, democracy, common interest and common sense, based on all people everywhere being vulnerable to the catastrophic impacts of nuclear weapons,

have come together in the search for disarmament. As happened with landmines and cluster munitions, like biological and chemical weapons before them, the same route of prohibition is being tried with nuclear weapons too. Will it succeed? While the answer is not clear yet, the ban treaty has certainly drawn much needed attention to the effects of nuclear weapons. This in itself may prove to be a worthwhile effort.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Nuclear weapons : Who has what at a glance, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>, accessed on July 26, 2017

² The label of Hibakusha has grown to encompass any person exposed to radiation from the nuclear fuel chain through the use and production of nuclear weapons as well as the processes that create and produce nuclear power.

³ Who Are The Hibakusha?, <http://hibakushastories.org/who-are-the-hibakusha>, accessed on Jul 25, 2017