



NUCLEAR WEAPONS



ICRC

IN BRIEF

HUMANITY AT A CROSSROADS: THE CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

"We ... witnessed a sight totally unlike anything we had ever seen before. The centre of the city was sort of a white patch, flattened and smooth like the palm of a hand. Nothing remained ... every living thing was petrified in an attitude of acute pain ... "

"There are no donors, no doctors ... consequently there is no treatment."

ICRC delegate Dr Marcel Junod, testimony from Hiroshima, September 1945

"Resolving ... to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons ..."

UN Security Council Summit Resolution 1887, September 2009

"... expresses ... deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, and reaffirms the need for all States to comply with ... international humanitarian law."

States party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, May 2010

"The ICRC today appeals to all States, and to all those in a position to influence them, to seize with determination and urgency the unique opportunities now at hand to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end."

ICRC President, Jakob Kellenberger, April 2010



Hiroshima, 1945.
Aftermath of the atomic
bomb blast: The Japan
Red Cross Hospital was
heavily damaged and
barely functioning

A burn victim of the
atomic bombing of
Hiroshima in 1945

NOT “NORMAL” WEAPONS

Though people have become used to the existence of nuclear weapons, there is nothing “normal” about such devices:

- The destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be limited in either space or time; the radiation released can affect health, agriculture, natural resources and populations over a very wide area and constitute a serious danger for future generations.
- Exploding a nuclear weapon in a populated area would immediately cause a huge number of deaths and injuries. It is also likely that the health infrastructure and medical services would be destroyed or extensively damaged, diminishing chances of survival for those who suffer serious injuries. There is currently no effective international capacity to assist the victims of nuclear weapons.
- Deaths in the months and years **after** the use of nuclear weapons can far exceed those at the time of use. Owing to their severe effects on human metabolism, initial deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki nearly doubled in the five years following the atomic bombings to more than 300,000. Many nuclear weapons produced since 1945 are far more destructive.
- The use of even a limited number of nuclear weapons is likely to have a damaging effect on the climate and reduce food production for many years, resulting in the disruption of

global food distribution and mass starvation.

- The International Court of Justice has concluded that “the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.”
- A total of 184 States have formally renounced the possession of nuclear weapons through legally binding commitments within the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The five nuclear-weapon States party to this treaty are legally bound to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.

Given their unique characteristics and far-reaching consequences, the issue of nuclear weapons must be addressed not only on the basis of military doctrines and power politics. The existence of nuclear weapons poses some of the most profound questions about the point at which the rights of States must yield to the interests of humanity, the capacity of our species to master the technology it creates and the reach of international humanitarian law. The debate must ultimately be about human beings, about the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law and about the collective future of humanity.



THE CROSSROADS

- An estimated 22,000 warheads remain in existence, with the number of States possessing such weapons steadily increasing. This is despite a significant decrease in the stockpiles of US and Russian nuclear warheads since the end of the Cold War.
- Four countries not party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons are known or believed to have nuclear weapons, an increase of three since 1998.
- Access to the materials and knowledge essential for the development of nuclear weapons has increased since the end of the Cold War and is still not adequately controlled.
- Access to the materials needed for the production of nuclear weapons will continue to increase if more and more countries pursue the production of nuclear energy as an alternative to the use of fossil fuels.
- The absence of steady progress towards a global norm on the non-use and elimination of nuclear weapons makes them more attractive to a growing number of States and non-State entities and further complicates efforts to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end.
- Action or inaction towards stigmatizing and eliminating nuclear weapons in the coming years is likely to determine whether the twenty-first century is one in which nuclear weapons are eliminated or in which they become available to an ever larger number of States and other actors, making their eventual use increasingly likely.

POSITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

- 1945 The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in a message on nuclear weapons to all National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, expresses the hope that these weapons will be “abolished.”
- 1950 The ICRC informs States party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions that “with atomic bombs ... discrimination became impossible ... Their inevitable consequence is extermination pure and simple ... [their] effects, immediate and lasting, prevent access to the wounded and their treatment ... the mere assumption that atomic weapons may be used, for whatever reason, is enough to make illusory any attempt to protect non-combatants by legal texts.” On this basis, the ICRC calls on States to take “all steps to reach agreement on the prohibition of atomic weapons.”
- 1957 The ICRC proposes a prohibition on the use of weapons whose harmful effects – resulting, *inter alia*, from the release of radioactive agents – cannot be controlled by those who use them, thus endangering the civilian population.
- 1948, 1952, 1957, 1969, 1977, 1981
International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, bringing together States and all the components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, call for the prohibition of nuclear weapons and of all weapons of mass destruction.
- 1996 In response to the 1996 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion that the use of nuclear weapons would “generally be contrary to ... the principles and rules of humanitarian law,” the ICRC states, at the United Nations General Assembly, that “it is difficult to envisage how a use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law.”
- 2010 The president of the ICRC appeals to all States for urgent action to eliminate nuclear weapons due to their unique destructive capacity and irreversible human costs (see next section).
- 2011 The Council of Delegates, which represents the entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, adopts a resolution in which it appeals to all States to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again. It also calls on States to pursue and conclude with urgency a legally binding agreement to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons. It commits the Movement to raising public awareness and engaging in continuous dialogue with governments to achieve these goals.



When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, 70,000 people were killed immediately, some of them vaporized into eerie shadows by the intense heat of the blast

AN APPEAL BY THE ICRC

In April 2010, the president of the ICRC, Jakob Kellenberger, made an historic appeal on nuclear weapons to States and to those in a position to influence them. In his statement Mr Kellenberger stressed that the organization's position on nuclear weapons must go beyond purely legal considerations. He emphasized the unique nature of these weapons:

- the unspeakable suffering they cause
- the impossibility of controlling their effects in space and time
- the risks of escalation they create
- the threat they pose to the environment, to future generations and to the survival of humanity.

On this basis, the ICRC called on all States, regardless of their views on the legality of nuclear weapons, to ensure that such weapons are never again used and are eliminated through a legally binding international treaty. The ICRC also pointed out that it was essential to prevent their continued proliferation and to control access to materials and technologies that can be used to produce them.



UN Photo/Mark Garten

**UN Security Council Summit
on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and
Disarmament, September 2009**

TIME FOR ACTION

Humanity is at a crossroads: either a credible process or processes will be put in place leading to the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons or the number of States and other actors able and willing to use nuclear weapons will continue to increase. If the latter were to occur, whether through action or inertia, the probability of nuclear weapons being used will grow steadily, with the inevitable “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” this entails. These consequences will preclude any adequate humanitarian response by States or humanitarian organizations. Prevention is the only solution.

In 2009 and 2010, five nuclear-weapon States, the UN Security Council and 179 non-nuclear-weapon States party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons made or

reaffirmed commitments to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policies, decrease their numbers, prevent further proliferation and completely eliminate them.

Everyone has a stake in this issue. Each person can act to ensure that the political and legal commitments made in recent years are converted into an effective international process that produces concrete steps in the near future and leads to the prohibition and elimination of all nuclear weapons in the shortest possible time frame.

The entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement will support and encourage urgent action now to put an end to the era of nuclear weapons.

"... we have no greater responsibility than to bring the nuclear era to a close ... We cannot at once keep sacred the miracle of existence and hold sacrosanct the capacity to destroy it. We cannot hold hostage to sovereign gridlock the keys to final deliverance from the nuclear nightmare. We cannot withhold the resources essential to break its grip, to reduce its dangers. We cannot sit in silent acquiescence to the faded homilies of the nuclear priesthood. It is time to reassert the primacy of individual conscience, the voice of reason and the rightful interests of humanity."

General Lee Butler, U.S. Air Force (Ret.), former Commander-in-Chief (1992–1994), United States Strategic Air Command (responsible for US nuclear forces), 2 February 1998



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