

# Preventing a Humanitarian Catastrophe

*Presentation for First Committee – Draft 3*

Distinguished delegates:

Let us take a few moments to remind you of some uncomfortable truths: Today, more than 19,000 nuclear weapons are stationed at an estimated 111 locations across the globe. Two thousand are kept on hair-trigger alert. Many hundreds are deliverable by submarines that patrol our oceans at all times. Hundreds more are mounted on intercontinental ballistic missiles, ready to fly at a moment's notice. Thousands of "extras" are being held in reserve. Every one poses a direct and constant threat to people everywhere. Every one is a humanitarian catastrophe waiting to happen.

In May 2010, at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, states parties to the treaty expressed their "deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons", and reaffirmed "the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law". There is no credible scenario that warrants the use of nuclear weapons. In the halls of these United Nations, no state can justifiably dismiss the rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution, or the prohibitions on causing superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering and widespread, severe and long-term damage to the environment.

Outlawing and eliminating nuclear weapons – the most egregious weapons of terror and mass murder ever created – is the only absolute guarantee against their use. A legally binding, non-discriminatory and comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons is long overdue, and must be pursued as a matter of urgency. This proposed treaty is the centrepiece of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's disarmament action plan. It enjoys the support of three in four nations and the overwhelming majority of the world's people. We implore you to begin negotiations now. Do not await the sight of a city in ashes before finally mustering the will to act.

Distinguished delegates:

The US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 67 years ago remind us that nuclear abolition is a humanitarian necessity. The devices used in those attacks were small by today's standards, yet they claimed more than 210,000 lives by the end of 1945. Many thousands more have died in the decades since from radiation-related illnesses. Within moments of the detonations, ground temperatures had exceeded 4,000 degrees Celsius; shockwaves had reached a thousand kilometres an hour. Human beings were reduced to vapour, or became projectiles. The physical and emotional scars from the attacks persist to this day.

With the Doomsday Clock ticking closer to midnight, we must re-open our eyes to the threat of nuclear weapons. A repeat of the devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki – or worse – is not merely a theoretical possibility; it is a real and present danger, and must be prevented at all costs. The discourse about nuclear weapons use in recent years has focused largely on terrorists and states that do not in fact possess nuclear weapons, but by far the greatest threat comes from the existing nuclear-armed states, which continue to place nuclear weapons at the centre of their national security policies.

At a time when economic and ecological crises are leading to heightened tensions over increasingly scarce resources, the potential for wars among major powers armed with nuclear weapons is real and must be acknowledged. Although it is unlikely that any such war would be initiated with a nuclear strike, we must squarely face the possibility that a conventional war among nuclear-armed states could escalate to a nuclear holocaust. We urge you not to allow a small handful of powerful states to keep the entire world held at ransom.

Distinguished delegates:

In the 1980s, the World Health Organization declared nuclear weapons “the greatest immediate threat to the health and welfare of mankind”. More recently, the International Committee of the Red Cross has described them as “unique in their destructive power, in the unspeakable human suffering they cause, in the impossibility of controlling their effects in space and time, in the risks of escalation they create, and in the threat they pose to the environment, to future generations, and indeed to the survival of humanity”.

Nuclear bombings eradicate the social infrastructure required for recovery from conflict. Communications and transportation systems, fire-fighting equipment, and hospitals and pharmacies all lie in rubble throughout a zone of complete destruction extending for kilometres. Those attempting to provide relief to the sick and wounded are exposed to high levels of radioactivity, risking their own lives. Nowhere in the world would it be possible to render effective relief in the event of a nuclear attack, underscoring the absolute humanitarian imperative of prevention through elimination of nuclear arsenals.

A limited nuclear war involving 100 Hiroshima-sized weapons – a tiny fraction of the total global stockpile – would cause tens of millions of immediate deaths, and disrupt the global climate and agricultural production so severely that more than a billion people would be at risk of famine. Global temperatures and rainfall would drop abruptly, shortening growing seasons and making food inaccessible to hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people. A war fought using 1,000 nuclear weapons – around 5 per cent of the global total – would render the planet uninhabitable for all time.

Distinguished delegates:

Even if a nuclear weapon were never again exploded over a city, the intolerable effects of their production, testing and deployment continue to be experienced as

an ongoing personal and community catastrophe around the globe. This must not be overlooked. Decades of nuclear tests carried out at more than 60 locations worldwide – often on the lands of indigenous and minority peoples – have had a staggering toll on human health and the environment. Physicians estimate that 2.4 million people will eventually die from cancers caused by atmospheric nuclear tests alone.

The production of highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium – the raw ingredients for all nuclear weapons – is also highly hazardous. Large volumes of uranium waste tailings create long-lasting radioactive and chemical pollution. No uranium mine anywhere in the world has been fully cleaned up and restored environmentally after mining has finished.

Uranium is also the fuel for civilian nuclear power programmes, which are never truly peaceful. The disasters at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011 displaced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. The Chernobyl meltdown caused at least tens of thousands of cancer deaths and the humanitarian damage caused by the Fukushima catastrophe is still immeasurable. Even during normal use, nuclear reactors emit radiation into the air, water and soil, resulting in increased rates of leukaemia in children living within 50 kilometres. And the waste from nuclear power remains radioactive and dangerous for millennia.

Finally, we must consider the vast opportunity costs of nuclear weapons. As millions across the globe go hungry and are denied access to clean water, basic medicines and sanitation, the nuclear-armed nations spend close to US\$300 million a day on their nuclear arsenals. The entire annual budget of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs is equal to the amount spent on nuclear weapons *every hour*. This obscene diversion of resources away from meeting human needs is itself a form of catastrophic harm, and must be condemned.

Distinguished delegates:

Let us conclude by reissuing Kofi Annan's vital warning, in one of his final speeches as secretary-general of this esteemed organization, that we are sleepwalking towards disaster. Six years have passed since then, and precious little has been done to eradicate the unique existential threat of nuclear weapons. We cannot simply sit back and *hope* that the nuclear-armed nations will one day disarm. For too long we have waited, hoping, and nothing has been done. If anything, we have slid further towards the nuclear precipice.

It is time for non-nuclear-weapon states to start a process to outlaw nuclear weapons completely and establish a framework for their total elimination. A ban on the world's worst weapons is long overdue, and must be the next big negotiating objective of the international community. Be among the countries that drive this process – now!