

Open Letter in Support of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

21 September 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has starkly demonstrated the urgent need for greater international cooperation to address all major threats to the health and welfare of humankind. Paramount among them is the threat of nuclear war. The risk of a nuclear weapon detonation today — whether by accident, miscalculation or design — appears to be increasing, with the recent deployment of new types of nuclear weapons, the abandonment of longstanding arms control agreements, and the very real danger of cyber-attacks on nuclear infrastructure. Let us heed the warnings of scientists, doctors and other experts. We must not sleepwalk into a crisis of even greater proportions than the one we have experienced this year.

It is not difficult to foresee how the bellicose rhetoric and poor judgment of leaders in nuclear-armed nations might result in a calamity affecting all nations and peoples. As past leaders, foreign ministers and defence ministers of Albania, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain and Turkey — all countries that claim protection from an ally's nuclear weapons — we appeal to current leaders to advance disarmament before it is too late. An obvious starting point for the leaders of our own countries would be to declare without qualification that nuclear weapons serve no legitimate military or strategic purpose in light of the catastrophic human and environmental consequences of their use. In other words, our countries should reject any role for nuclear weapons in our defence.

By claiming protection from nuclear weapons, we are promoting the dangerous and misguided belief that nuclear weapons enhance security. Rather than enabling progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons, we are impeding it and perpetuating nuclear dangers — all for fear of upsetting our allies who cling to these weapons of mass destruction. But friends can and must speak up when friends engage in reckless behavior that puts their lives and ours in peril.

Without doubt, a new nuclear arms race is under way, and a race for disarmament is urgently needed. It is time to bring the era of reliance on nuclear weapons to a permanent end. In 2017, 122 countries took a courageous but long-overdue step in that direction by adopting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons — a landmark global accord that places nuclear weapons on the same legal footing as chemical and biological weapons and establishes a framework to eliminate them verifiably and irreversibly. Soon it will become binding international law.

To date, our countries have opted not to join the global majority in supporting this treaty. But our leaders should reconsider their positions. We cannot afford to dither in the face of this existential threat to humanity. We must show courage and boldness — and join the treaty. As states parties, we could remain in alliances with nuclear-armed states, as nothing in the treaty itself nor in our respective defence pacts precludes that. But we would be legally bound never under any circumstances to assist or encourage our allies to use, threaten to use or possess nuclear weapons. Given the very broad popular support in our countries for disarmament, this would be an uncontroversial and much-lauded move.

The prohibition treaty is an important reinforcement to the half-century-old Non-Proliferation Treaty, which, though remarkably successful in curbing the spread of nuclear weapons to more countries, has failed to establish a universal taboo against the possession of nuclear weapons. The five nuclear-armed nations that had nuclear weapons at the time of the NPT's negotiation — the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China — apparently view it as a licence to retain their nuclear forces in perpetuity. Instead of disarming, they are investing heavily in upgrades to their arsenals, with plans to retain them for many decades to come. This is patently unacceptable.

The prohibition treaty adopted in 2017 can help end decades of paralysis in disarmament. It is a beacon of hope in a time of darkness. It enables countries to subscribe to the highest available multilateral norm against nuclear weapons and build international pressure for action. As its preamble recognizes, the effects of nuclear weapons “transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of current and future generations, and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation”.

With close to 14,000 nuclear weapons located at dozens of sites across the globe and on submarines patrolling the oceans at all times, the capacity for destruction is beyond our imagination. All responsible leaders must act now to ensure that the horrors of 1945 are never repeated. Sooner or later, our luck will run out — unless we act. The nuclear weapon ban treaty provides the foundation for a more secure world, free from this ultimate menace. We must embrace it now and work to bring others on board. There is no cure for a nuclear war. Prevention is our only option.

Signed by:

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