
United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination

23 March 2017

English only

New York, 27-31 March 2017 and 15 June-7 July 2017

On the Objectives and Significance of Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons

Submitted by Soka Gakkai International (SGI)

Overview

1. As we welcome the start of the United Nations conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination, it is important to reflect on the larger implications of this undertaking. A broader framing and context, extending beyond legal and political commitments, can open the way for imagining different futures and gaining greater engagement by individuals, civil society and states towards the realization of a world free from nuclear weapons. To offer such reflections and perspectives is consonant with the call, expressed in UN Resolution 71/258 adopted by the General Assembly, for the “participation and contribution” of civil society and may be seen as a role particularly suited to civil society organizations and movements that draw inspiration from religious and ethical sources. As a Buddhist faith-based organization committed to grassroots public education for nuclear weapons abolition, the SGI wishes to submit the following working paper in order to contribute to the deliberations and successful outcome of the conference.

Confronting nuclear realities

2. As the successive International Conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons have made clear, nuclear weapons are not like other weapons. They differ even from other weapons of mass destruction. The scale of their lethality—the instantaneous, enduring and indiscriminate nature of the destruction they wreak—creates an essential qualitative distinction with all other weapons.

3. Nuclear weapons have escaped the bounds of any traditional logic of armaments, balance of power or deterrence, to become the instruments of planetary murder-suicide. As SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has stressed, “The inhumanity of nuclear weapons is found not only in their overwhelming destructive power. It lies in their potential to instantaneously obliterate and render meaningless the painstaking efforts of generations of human beings... They are a denial and rejection of our very humanity...”¹

4. Alongside the horror and revulsion that the prospect of any use of nuclear weapons provokes, there is an earnest and widely held desire that nuclear weapons never be used again.

¹ [“Message for the symposium ‘Conversation: A way forward to eliminate nuclear weapons—Perspectives of Norwegian and Japanese peace movements.’”](#) by Daisaku Ikeda, September 5, 2016.

This sentiment is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the words and actions of the world's hibakusha, the victims of nuclear weapons use, production and testing.

5. We also recognize this desire and determination in the world's political leaders, including the leaders of the nuclear-weapon states who have personally borne the imponderable burden of holding the world's fate in their hands. We recognize that this desire has motivated courageous action in the field of disarmament to date. At the same time, it has often been tethered to the doctrine of deterrence. We call on the political leadership of these states to decouple these concepts, to recognize that apocalyptic violence restrained can never be mistaken for security or peace.

Demilitarizing international relations

6. We fully endorse the humanitarian arguments for the prohibition of nuclear weapons, focused on the contradiction that they remain legal while other, less indiscriminate and inhumane weapons have been outlawed. At the same time, we wish to encourage recognition of the fundamental nature of the transformation their prohibition implies and their elimination will require. We must, for example, ask whether humankind can continue to organize political states around violence, its monopolization and resulting legitimization.

7. The goal of achieving a world without nuclear weapons should be understood as integral to the larger effort to demilitarize international relations and develop nonviolent conceptions of the state.

8. To assert this, however, is not to establish a new set of conditions that must first be satisfied before nuclear weapons can be outlawed and eliminated. Rather, we draw strength from the deeply transformative power of confronting the reality of nuclear weapons and taking concrete steps to prohibit and abolish them. We are confident that the effort to counter this most dire and unacceptable threat to human life and dignity will tap into previously unrealized capacities for courage, vision and caring in individuals, organizations, societies and political cultures.

Challenging the deterrence paradigm

9. In recent years, the logic of deterrence has been challenged from a variety of perspectives, including the legal, the ethical and the pragmatic. Faith traditions have contributed to this discourse.

10. As Buddhists, we find valuable insight in these words of Shakyamuni: "Look at those who fight, ready to kill! Fear arises from taking up arms and preparing to strike."² This bears directly on the psychology of arms, violence and security, exposing the unspoken logic of hostile confrontation. It upends the generally accepted logic of deterrence: Greater and more lethal armaments do not bring freedom from fear, but in fact amplify and deepen it, imprinting a sense of powerlessness and resignation in the face of the seeming inevitability of violence.

11. Challenging the entrenched global pathology of fear and powerlessness is central to the work of this conference.

The right to survive and thrive on Earth

12. The world's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs) represent a crucial source of legal

² *Budda no kotoba* [Buddha's Words], by Hajime Nakamura, 1958.

and practical precedent for a treaty outlawing nuclear weapons. They also provide an invaluable body of learning and experience regarding the positive transformation of security thinking that disarmament brings. Many of the states within the NWFZs have made efforts to avoid presenting a military threat to their neighbors, in order to create a region in which the citizens of all states can live free of the fear of such threats.

13. Realizing the right of all people on Earth to live free from fear of nuclear destruction is the ultimate objective of this conference. This would be a fulfillment of the commitment to universal human rights that has been central to the UN's mission since its inception.

14. When the second president of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, issued a statement calling for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons in 1957, he based it on this forthright assertion: "We, the citizens of the world, have an inviolable right to live."³

15. The vision that can make possible achieving and sustaining a world without nuclear weapons arises from a deep commitment to protecting the rights and dignity of all people everywhere. This requires a readiness to speak up for each other's rights and to recognize the value in what we each treasure, as well as a shared determination to fulfill our sacred obligation to leave to future generations a planet on which human and non-human life may flourish.

Mustering voices of public conscience

16. Civil society can help give human face to problems that might otherwise be discussed only in national and governmental contexts. To be successful, a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons must be more than an agreement among governments. It must heed, reflect and embody the voices of the entire human family, for each of whom this is an issue of vital concern. Ideally, it should pioneer a new form of international law, deriving its power and legitimacy from the inviolable right of all people—of humanity in its diversity and totality—to survive and thrive on Earth.

17. The landmark advisory opinion on the threat or use of nuclear weapons delivered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in July 1996 was informed by some four million "declarations of public conscience" submitted in forty languages. Today, we call for an even greater enlistment of the power of individual and collective conscience in order to support, strengthen and enrich the negotiation process for a treaty outlawing nuclear weapons.

18. This is an issue that concerns us all. The voices of people from throughout the world must be heard, especially those of youth, women, indigenous peoples and others that have subjected to marginalization. Delivering such expressions of conscience to the negotiations and the international community is a crucial contribution that civil society can make.

19. It is time to give new, creative and life-affirming form to the universally shared desire that nuclear weapons never be used again. Humanity deserves the kind of peace that can only be realized when people come together across all differences to uphold and protect the dignity of life. This is the opportunity our generation now faces: to construct an enduring monument to the human capacity to courageously confront dire realities, learn from these new ways of being and shape our fate to happier ends.

³ ["A declaration calling for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons."](#) by Josei Toda, 1957.

Recommendations

20. We encourage the negotiating conference to:
- (a) Remain cognizant of the historic nature of this global undertaking, and to remain undeterred in the face of all obstacles.
 - (b) Incorporate in the treaty text a recognition that nuclear weapons are unacceptable and must be prohibited and eliminated because of their inhumane nature.
 - (c) Continue to encourage all States to participate, recognizing that the negotiations are an effort to implement NPT Article VI, which obliges parties to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons.
 - (d) Continue to heed the voices of civil society, especially those of the world's hibakusha, so that the process of the negotiations will have a consistently human focus; to declare that the treaty manifests the shared commitment of the world's people that the suffering endured by the hibakusha must never be repeated.