

Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Use Discussed

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[Alexandra Schmitt](#)

The international community cannot adequately prepare for the impact of nuclear weapons use of any scale, 127 countries concluded at a two-day conference last month in Oslo on the humanitarian and economic impacts of nuclear weapons.

The concluding message of nearly every presentation was that any use of a nuclear weapon would devastate human populations on a massive scale and decimate the economy and environment. Most states, including Brazil, Germany, India, and Turkey, said that eliminating nuclear weapons was the only way to prevent their use.

In addition to the 127 countries, participants included international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as representatives from civil society.

The five countries that the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) recognizes as nuclear-weapon states—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—did not attend the meeting. India and Pakistan, nuclear-armed states that are not NPT parties, did participate in the conference.

Representatives of government and civil society gave presentations on the immediate impacts on human life of using nuclear weapons. Rashid Khalikov, director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Geneva, warned of the wider and longer-term consequences of nuclear weapons use on the international economy, global development, and the environment. Experts from nongovernmental organizations, including Ira Helfand, co-president of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, stressed the impossibility of preparing an effective international or state response to the humanitarian disasters of a nuclear attack.

Speakers cited evidence from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear power plant disasters at Chernobyl and Fukushima, and Soviet nuclear weapons tests at the Semipalatinsk site in Kazakhstan to illustrate the impacts of a nuclear detonation. A survivor of the Nagasaki bombing gave testimony on the devastating consequences of an atomic bomb explosion.

An effective response to a nuclear attack and assistance to survivors are “not presently available and not possible at the international level,” nor could such a response ever be developed, the ICRC said in its presentation. Representatives from the UN Development Programme concurred, warning that the only solution is to “make sure that a detonation of a nuclear weapon never happens.”

In statements at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva on March 5, the second day of the Oslo meeting, the five NPT nuclear-weapon states called the gathering in Norway a distraction from the ongoing work at the CD and an upcoming preparatory meeting for the 2015 NPT Review Conference. The preparatory meeting is scheduled to run from April 22 to May 3 in Geneva.

Joanne Adamson, British permanent representative to the CD, expressed concern that the Oslo event would “divert attention and discussion away from what has proven to be the most effective means of reducing nuclear dangers—a practical, step-by-step approach that includes all those who have nuclear weapons.” She argued that banning nuclear weapons, as some countries at the meeting

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proposed, is not “the right way to move us closer to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.”

Laura Kennedy, U.S. ambassador to the CD, said that the decision not to attend the Oslo meeting was made in consultation with the other NPT nuclear-weapon states. In their statements, China, France, and Russia gave similar reasons for not attending.

Opportunity for Discussion

Referring to criticisms such as those expressed in the March 5 statements at the CD, Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said the Oslo conference was a way to have a focused discussion of the humanitarian impacts of a nuclear attack. Eide cited the 2010 NPT Review Conference’s final document, which expressed the parties’ “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons.”

In his opening statement, Eide, who chaired the Oslo meeting, said the gathering was “not intended to be a substitute for any of the established arenas,” apparently referring to forums such as the CD, but was rather “an opportunity to establish a sound understanding” of the 2010 document’s language on nuclear weapons use.

Mexico offered to host a follow-up meeting on the humanitarian impacts, but no date was set.

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