

## Nuclear Disarmament and Human Survival

- [Arms Control Today](#)

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Since the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapons have motivated ordinary citizens to push their leaders to pursue arms control and disarmament measures to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons use.

For decades, it has been well understood that the direct effects of a large-scale nuclear conflict could result in several hundred million human fatalities, while the indirect effects would be far greater, leading to the loss of billions of lives.

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat of a U.S.-Russian conflict has decreased, but the risk of a nuclear war in other regions has grown. Recent studies find that a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan involving 100 detonations of 15-kiloton bombs would kill 20 million in the first week and reduce global temperatures by 1.3 degrees Celsius, thereby putting another 1 to 2 billion people at risk for famine.

Clearly, the use of nuclear weapons would result in humanitarian emergencies far beyond the immediate target zones of the warring parties and would violate the basic principles of international humanitarian law, including avoidance of attacks that could affect civilians indiscriminately.

Nevertheless, the world's nine nuclear-armed nations still threaten to use their massive nuclear arsenals in the name of deterrence, and many continue to build up their nuclear war-fighting capabilities.

Appropriately enough, the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference final document expressed "deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and the need for all States...to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law."

The NPT nuclear-weapon states committed to "diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons" and "[d]iscuss policies that could prevent the use of nuclear weapons." In keeping with the NPT document's action plan, Norway hosted a conference last March in Oslo on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use. Mexico will host a follow-up conference in February. In April, 80 countries declared that "[i]t is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances." In October, 125 states endorsed a similar statement.

Unfortunately, the five NPT nuclear-weapon states boycotted the Oslo conference, and several have criticized the April statement as a "distraction." The arrogant and hostile response, particularly from France and Russia, has only deepened the frustration of the non-nuclear-weapon states.

Rather than dismiss the Mexico conference, the nuclear-weapon states should participate in and support future statements warning of the consequences of nuclear weapons use. Leading non-nuclear-weapon states also must come together around proposals that more effectively challenge dangerous nuclear doctrines.

The call from some states to negotiate a convention banning the possession of nuclear weapons in

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the moribund Conference on Disarmament (CD) is a recipe for inaction. Even if non-nuclear-weapon states were to adopt such a convention outside the CD, it would have little value without the support and participation of the NPT nuclear-armed states, which oppose such an effort.

A more promising way to meet the NPT action plan goal of assuring non-nuclear-weapon states against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons would be to develop a legally binding instrument banning the use of nuclear weapons. This is the approach taken with respect to chemical and biological weapons through the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

Discussions on a ban on the use of nuclear weapons could begin in a new, dedicated diplomatic forum. Even if the nuclear-weapon states do not initially join in the negotiation or sign the instrument, the process itself and the final product would further delegitimize nuclear weapons, strengthen the legal norm against their use, and put pressure on nuclear-armed states to revise their nuclear doctrines.

Another approach would be to press each of the nuclear-armed states to explain the effects of its nuclear war plans at the 2015 NPT Review Conference. Each should be required to explain how the use of such weapons would be consistent with the law of armed conflict and other aspects of international human rights and humanitarian law.

With action on key disarmament initiatives at a near standstill, initiatives designed to jump-start progress are in order. For example, the United States could accelerate implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, and Washington and Moscow could agree to reduce their stockpiles well below treaty-mandated ceilings. At the same time, other nuclear-armed states could pledge not to increase the overall size of their nuclear stockpiles, so long as U.S. and Russian leaders continue to slash theirs.

As President Barack Obama said last September, "The use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world is an affront to human dignity and a threat to the security of people everywhere." That certainly holds true for nuclear weapons as well. It is vital that global leaders welcome and pursue new, creative approaches to disarmament in order to guard against nuclear catastrophe.

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