



The role of international health and humanitarian organisations in advancing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract:

This presentation reviews current evidence on the consequences and growing danger of nuclear war, and paths to eradicate nuclear weapons, particularly the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) which entered into legal force in January 2021.

Climate disruption and the acute risk of nuclear war constitute existential threats. The global COVID-19 pandemic, following decades of expert warnings that the world was inadequately prepared for inevitable future pandemics, has highlighted the crucial role of scientific data and evidence-based advocacy to underpin public policy and governance. Durably preventing nuclear war requires eliminating nuclear weapons before they are otherwise inevitably used, and is a pre-condition for human survival, civilisation and progress.

The World Health Organisation assessed that “nuclear weapons constitute the greatest immediate threat to the health and welfare” of humankind, and “whatever remained of the medical services in the world could not alleviate the disaster in any significant way”.

A regional nuclear war, using 250 relatively small nuclear weapons, <2% of the world total and <1% of their explosive yield, would inject 16 - 36 million tons of black smoke into the stratosphere. The smoke would heat, loft, spread worldwide and destroy stratospheric ozone; cooling, darkening and drying the earth beneath for over a decade. Within days, global temperatures would plummet between 3 and 8°C, conditions last occurring during the Ice Age 20,000 years ago. Agriculture would be decimated, and upwards of 2 billion people starve to death. Nuclear war involving the larger arsenals would risk human extinction.

The danger of nuclear war is widely assessed to be as great as ever, and growing. The Doomsday Clock stands further forward than ever before. The number of armed conflicts with potential for nuclear escalation is growing, proliferating cyber-attacks put nuclear command and control at risk in new ways, arms control agreements have been abrogated,

no disarmament negotiations are underway, and all 9 nuclear-armed states are modernising their arsenals at profligate cost in ways which increase the risks of their use.

The TPNW is the first treaty to comprehensively prohibit the worst weapon of mass destruction, and contains the only treaty-codified framework for the elimination of nuclear weapons and programs – time-bound and verified. International health and humanitarian organisations welcomed the TPNW as an “essential step towards preventing the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and a big win for planetary health” and urge all states to join it.

Keywords:

nuclear disarmament, nuclear winter, nuclear famine, existential risk, ban treaty