Opening Remarks

By

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“Nuclear Weapons: Time for abolition”

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Excellencies, ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be with you today representing the Office for Disarmament Affairs at this event. The Global Security Institute rightfully deserves plaudits for their ongoing efforts to bring the voice of morality to the global discussion on the future of nuclear weapons. I want to thank the Institute and our host, the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See, for inviting me to speak today.

Morality and the abolition of nuclear weapons is a topic that, in an increasingly contentious international environment, is of critical importance.

The debate about morality in warfare is almost as old as war itself. However, when it comes to nuclear weapons, and because of their vast destructive power and devastating human – predominantly civilian – consequences, they are in a category all of their own.

In recognition of this fact, three years ago, in a statement to the people of Nagasaki—a city that, as we all know, was the victim of the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons—the Secretary General stated clearly that: “The humanitarian impact of the use of nuclear weapons cannot be reconciled with the laws of war and basic morality.”

This basic, dare I say essential, morality referred to by the Secretary-General is a morality that states it is wrong to use weapons indiscriminately; that it is wrong to use weapons without proportion or precaution; and, above all, that it is wrong to precipitate the mass killing of civilians, either directly or indirectly.

In other words, it is the basic morality that is reflected in the precepts of international humanitarian law and, to my mind at least, it is exceedingly difficult to see how, by any leap of logic, nuclear weapons can be anything other than contrary to international humanitarian law.

This is not a new concept - it was recognised by the General Assembly in 1961, through Resolution 1653 (VXI) and again, of course, in the landmark International Court of Justice opinion of 1996, which found that the threat or use of nuclear weapons “would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law.”
We should focus more on what this means. Horrific as the consequences of the use of atomic bombs were for the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there were survivors. We have no idea of what the consequences would be should contemporary nuclear weapons be used, but indisputably these weapons assure perishability. Today the message pronounced by nuclear weapons is clear: people are expendable.

This is why Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has often referred to disarmament and non-proliferation as global public goods precisely because their benefits are indivisible and enjoyed by all Member States – indeed, by all people.

Later this month, the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the NPT, will commence. The importance of this treaty cannot be understated. It remains the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime and the essential foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.

However, amidst the NPT’s ‘action plans’, the ‘step by step approaches’ and the ‘non-proliferation obligations’, the voice of moral persuasion is slowly but surely being felt.

This is evident in that the consensus outcome document from the last Review Conference five years ago, expressed its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons. This agreed position has precipitated a gathering momentum for the humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament; one that all but ensures this issue will have a significant role at this year’s Review Conference.

This movement – borne out of the lack of progress by the nuclear-weapon States to address seriously the commitments they have undertaken, as they continue to preserve, improve and rationalize their nuclear arsenals – has resuscitated the link between nuclear weapons and international humanitarian law and reinvigorated the frozen debate about the abolition of nuclear weapons.

The humanitarian movement has forged a new common understanding of the catastrophic consequences that would result from even a limited use of nuclear weapons and also of the international’s community’s inability to respond in any way to mitigate the human suffering that such a use would cause.
In addition, the movement has created new constituencies for nuclear disarmament—uniting medical practitioners, climate scientists and relief workers with the peace and security community.

The third and most recent Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, held in Vienna last December, was attended by 158 countries and resulted in a pledge by Austria to ‘fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.’ These conferences, the first held in 2013 in Oslo, Norway, and the second in Nayarit, Mexico in 2014, help in clarifying beyond any doubt the real consequences for humanity and the natural environment resulting from the use of nuclear weapons.

Additionally, it is worth noting that 155 United Nations Member States supported the statement on humanitarian consequences delivered by New Zealand at the UN General Assembly’s First Committee in November last year.

Those who dismiss the humanitarian movement as a utopian distraction would do well to heed these numbers because they represent over 80 per cent of the NPT’s States Parties. This overwhelming majority of States parties now believe that humanitarian considerations should be at the centre of all future disarmament deliberation.

I would like to conclude by commending the critical role civil society has played in developing and spreading the humanitarian message. I encourage those organisations that have taken up the humanitarian standard, including GSI, to redouble this support and activism in advancing global nuclear disarmament and strengthening the NPT.

The rationales for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament are many and obvious. Nuclear weapons are expensive; they have no military utility; and they diminish, not enhance stability, as many would have us believe. Yet above and beyond all of these reasons, the moral imperative remains the most urgent rationale for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Let us leave to future generations a safer and more peaceful world than the imperfect one we share today.