



Nobel Peace Prize: UK health and science organisations applaud nuclear ban treaty

A historic, multilaterally negotiated Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was overwhelmingly adopted at the United Nations in New York in July 2017. As well as making nuclear weapons clearly illegal under international law for the first time, the TPNW provides a framework for their total elimination. The treaty was brought about through years of collaboration of UN states and civil society, the latter led by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN). In recognition of this, the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize will be presented to ICAN in Oslo on 10th December.

Our organisations, representing thousands of UK-based doctors, public health professionals, scientists and engineers, welcome this treaty and the awarding of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, as a significant forward step towards eliminating the most destructive weapons ever created and the threat nuclear war poses to humanity and to the survival of all life on Earth.

The scientific evidence presented at three international conferences leading up to the Treaty showed that no meaningful medical response to a nuclear detonation is possible. Nuclear weapons are inevitably indiscriminate and disproportionate in their effects, killing hundreds of thousands if not millions of people through blast, heat and radiation. Radiation kills people from radiation sickness, while radioactive contamination of the environment causes cancers, chronic diseases, birth defects, and genetic damage over a much longer period.

The use of even a small fraction of the nuclear weapons that exist today would damage the global climate and food production so severely that billions of people would starve. The health and international relief communities acknowledge that they could not respond to the terrible devastation caused by nuclear weapons, and no amount of planning or spending on improved capacity can change this reality. A large scale nuclear war would threaten the very survival of humanity.

The establishment of a new international norm prohibiting nuclear weapons in the same way as biological and chemical weapons is a crucial step toward their elimination, but it is only a first step. This treaty provides the first real opportunity in decades to advance the global elimination of nuclear weapons – an objective that the UK and most other nations committed to years ago, when they signed up to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The parties to the TPNW must now work diligently and urgently to bring the nuclear-armed and nuclear-dependent states into compliance with this norm. The dangers posed by nuclear weapons are very real. As recent events between the US and North Korea remind us, nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence create a false sense of security. Nuclear war could happen by mistake or miscalculation - and has been narrowly averted on numerous previous occasions. The 1,800 US and Russian warheads currently ready to fire with decision times of tens of minutes raises this risk to a very dangerous level. The foolish actions of one leader in a crisis could trigger nuclear war.

We therefore urge the British Government in the strongest possible terms to acknowledge this reality, and to prepare to sign the Treaty, which provides practical and verifiable pathways for compliance. We also call on the UK to enter into multilateral discussions with the other nuclear-armed countries to eliminate nuclear weapons which threaten the security of everyone, including their own citizens.

Medact

(UK affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War)

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health

Scientists for Global Responsibility

(UK affiliate of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility)

Notes

1. Nobel Week/ Nobel Peace Prize Events 2017 – official programme
<https://www.nobelprize.org/events/calendar/2017-official-nobel-week-program.html>
2. The text of the UN ‘Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons’ can be downloaded from:
<https://www.un.org/disarmament/ptnw/>
3. Medact is an independent UK organisation of health professionals campaigning for a safer, fairer, better world. For more information, see: <https://www.medact.org/>
4. Scientists for Global Responsibility (SGR) is an independent UK membership organisation of about 750 natural scientists, social scientists, engineers, and other professionals in related areas. SGR promotes ethical science, design and technology. For more information, see <http://www.sgr.org.uk/>
5. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is a professional membership and awarding body and the voice of the environmental health profession. For more information, see: <http://www.cieh.org/>
6. For more information about ICAN, see <http://www.icanw.org/> and, for its work in the UK, see <http://uk.icanw.org/>
7. For an outline of the evidence concerning the dangers of nuclear weapons, see, for example: SGR (2017). Nuclear weapons: a beginner’s guide to the threats.
<http://www.sgr.org.uk/resources/nuclear-weapons-beginner-s-guide-threats>
Medact (2017). A Safer World. <https://www.medact.org/2017/resources/reports/safer-world-treating-britains-harmful-dependence-nuclear-weapons/>
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (2013). Nuclear Famine: Two Billion People at Risk? <http://www.ippnw.org/nuclear-famine.html>