

Joint statement

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Remembering Hiroshima: Nuclear disarmament is a humanitarian imperative

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's involvement in the nuclear debate dates back to the moment the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. On 6 August, 1945, at 8.15am, there was a flash of light over the city and in an instant, tens of thousands of people were dead, hospitals and health centres were incinerated and the city was left in ruins.

But in the midst of this appalling devastation, one hospital survived. The Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital – which miraculously escaped complete destruction despite its closeness to the epicentre of the blast – began to fill with casualties. Yet, most equipment and medicine had been destroyed or was unusable, and many of its doctors and nurses had been killed or injured. But there was dedication, and there was help to come. Dr. Marcel Junod of the International Committee of the Red Cross heard of the devastation and became the first non-Japanese doctor to assess the event. His reports are a chilling account of what occurs in the aftermath of a nuclear detonation.

The issue of nuclear weapons has remained a serious concern of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for the past 69 years. We voiced our concern about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons after their use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a result, in 1948 the 17th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement adopted a resolution calling for the prohibition of atomic weapons. This was followed by a resolution of the 18th International Conference in 1952. Later resolutions also urged the prohibition of all weapons of mass destruction.

More recently, in 2011, the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement again expressed its concern. It adopted a resolution stating that it is 'deeply concerned about the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the unspeakable human suffering they cause, the difficulty of controlling their effects in space and time, the threat they pose to the environment and to future generations and the risks of escalation they create'. It also appealed to States to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again and to pursue negotiations to prohibit and completely eliminate nuclear weapons based on existing commitments and international obligations. The Movement's determination to work towards these goals was further expressed in a four year plan of action adopted in 2013.

We welcome the fact that States have begun to give greater attention to the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. The international conferences that took place in Oslo in 2013 and Nayarit, Mexico in 2014 were important events that helped shed light on the horrific effects of a nuclear detonation. These meetings have confirmed to us that the use of any nuclear weapon would be catastrophic and would raise serious concerns under international humanitarian law. Indeed, more than ever, we find it difficult to envisage how any use of these weapons could be consistent with this body of law.

One of our important tasks as the world's largest humanitarian network is to ensure that our appeal is heard around the world, and the coming year will provide some important opportunities to do that.

The year 2015 will mark the 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. This is an important moment for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and indeed the entire world, to reflect on the dangers of these weapons and remind ourselves of the need to prohibit and eliminate them once and for all time.

In addition, States will continue to consider the consequences of nuclear weapons at the Third Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons being hosted by the Government of Austria in December. The 2015 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons will also be an important moment for States to consider the discussions of the Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna meetings and to reflect on how best to advance nuclear disarmament. We hope that the States in these fora will take into account the Movement's views on nuclear weapons and our calls for greater action in this area. The 2015 Council of Delegates and the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent will also be an opportunity to take stock of the Movement's activities on this subject.

In closing, we believe that the coming year is a pivotal time in the discussions about nuclear weapons. We urge international and non-governmental organizations as well as the components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to redouble their efforts to raise awareness of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. We also urge all States to recognize that nuclear disarmament is a humanitarian imperative and to reflect on how to make significant progress towards a world without nuclear weapons.

Humanity has been fortunate that nuclear weapons have not been used since those tragic days in August 1945 and we must do all that we can to make sure that instances such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki never happen again.

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