



Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons Day, 2019

"Nuclear weapons present an unacceptable danger to humanity. The only real way to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons is to eliminate nuclear weapons."

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General.¹

1. Introduction

Since 2013 the United Nations has observed 26th September as the *Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons*. This year the Secretary General spoke of his disappointment that there is an obvious slipping back into old habits, and that relationships in this area between states are mired in mistrust. He also noted the rise in irresponsible rhetoric, and alluded to the vast expenditure involved. As a recent article noted:

"More than \$100 billion dollars is spent every year in maintaining and modernizing nuclear weapons. [...] modest progress has been made on nuclear arms reduction. Russia and the U.S. have made cuts to their stockpiles under the START treaty, while France and the U.K. have met their disarmament objectives. However, no progress has been made in reducing the high launch-alert status of 2 000 American and Russian weapons. [...] nuclear-armed states pay mere lip-service to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and continue to place nuclear arms in their security policies."²

This year's observation was particularly important as in August 2019 the USA withdrew from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, even though it and the Russian Federation had previously committed to destroying all nuclear weapons. This holds the threat of destabilizing the international peace framework.³

2. The Church's Position

The Holy See expressed disappointment at the failure of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

"The Holy See notes with regret, inter alia, the lapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the failure to achieve entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the inability of the Conference on Disarmament even to begin negotiations on a ban on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, the so-called "modernization" of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and the instabilities at play in the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action. All of these are worrying signs of the continued erosion of multilateralism and of the ruled-based order."⁴

The insights of the Holy See are consistent with a development in teaching with regard to nuclear weapons that is quite significant. In November 2017, Pope Francis became the first Pope to condemn explicitly not only the use of nuclear weapons but also the "the threat of their use, as well as their very possession."⁵

The importance of the issue of total elimination of nuclear weapons was evidenced by the fact that

the Holy See signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons on the very day the Treaty opened for signatures. There is a theological and moral continuity at work here: every pope, since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, has sought to marginalize nuclear weapons.

As Notre Dame University's Professor Gerry Powers has noted,

“the Holy See has insisted on the need for progress toward mutual, verifiable nuclear disarmament. The pope's condemnation of nuclear use is consistent with the church's long-standing position that the use of nuclear weapons almost certainly would be indiscriminate or disproportionate, risk escalation to nuclear war, cause irreversible harm to the environment, and would break the nuclear taboo, undermining prospects for non-proliferation and disarmament.”⁶

The 2017 comment speaks to the present pope's condemnation of deterrence. In 1982, Pope John Paul II enunciated an 'interim ethic' on nuclear deterrence: “In current conditions,” he said, “‘deterrence’ based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable.”⁷ Pope Francis has now made a prudential moral judgment, based on his reading of today's very different signs of the nuclear times, that the strict conditions for the moral acceptability of deterrence are not being met. He has not abandoned his predecessor's formula, but has applied it to current conditions and come to a different prudential moral judgment. This is most significant, as Powers points out, particularly given the precarious and fractious state of world peace and the constant sabre rattling in various parts of the globe.

In addition to these worrying factors, there is also the fact that since 1945 there have been at least 2 000 nuclear tests; these have had negative effects on health, including that of unborn children, on soils and on groundwater. It is also known that at the moment there are probably about 14 000 nuclear weapons in the world; and it is estimated that up to US\$1.7 trillion will be spent on them over the next 30 years.⁸

Clearly, in a world that struggles to meet the basic needs of its poor, these huge amounts could better be spent in support of a development agenda. It

should be remembered that a great part of the rejection of nuclear weapons is based on the desire to promote an integral and positive peace, based on social and economic justice, meeting basic human needs, and securing a culture of human rights. Some speak of the need for 'strategic co-operative security' in this regard.

3. South Africa's Stance

This year South Africa co-hosted a High Level Panel at the UN General Assembly. The meeting was particularly important because twelve more countries either signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, bringing the total number of ratifications to 32 states. The Treaty will come into force 90 days after 50 States have ratified it. Of note is that two of our immediate neighbors, Botswana and Lesotho, signed the Treaty.⁹

Members of civil society have also welcomed the increasing number of states both signing and ratifying the Treaty. The International Red Cross in Southern Africa is one such example, noting that,

“Eleven of 16 member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have signed the Treaty, namely Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Madagascar, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia. South Africa is the only SADC member state to have ratified the Treaty. Globally, 79 countries have so far signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, while 32 have ratified the Treaty.”¹⁰

SA ratified the Treaty in February 2019. The Minister of International Relations and Co-operation said at that time, “South Africa's ratification of the Treaty [...] sends a positive signal of our continued commitment towards the achievement of a world free from the threat posed by nuclear weapons and ensuring that nuclear energy is used solely for peaceful purposes.”¹¹

At the time of signing the Treaty (which SA did on day it opened for signature), then President Jacob Zuma said:

“As a country that voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons programme, South Africa is

of the firm view that there are no safe hands for weapons of mass destruction [...] We are making a clarion call to all member states of the UN to sign and ratify the ban treaty in order to rid the world and humanity of these lethal weapons of mass destruction.”¹²

Speaking at the recent UN High Level Panel meeting, our current Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, Naledi Pandor, linked support for the total elimination of nuclear weapons to South Africa’s launch of the Decade of Peace in Honour of the legacy of Nelson Mandela.

“It is an honour for us to address the General Assembly in the first year of the Nelson Mandela Decade for Peace, which this Assembly last year agreed to would be from 2019 to 2028. This is a decade in which we have been called upon to intensify our efforts to pursue international peace and security, development and human rights.”¹³

4. Conclusion

In a time of mounting concern around the amounts being spent on nuclear weapons, the implied recourse to the use (again) of such weapons in the international arena, and a lack of consideration for alternate means of conflict resolution, make the presence of such weapons a very real threat to peace and the near occasion for widespread and dramatic consequences. In the light of these dangerous signs, Pope Francis’ condemnation of the very possession of nuclear weapons offers a new policy approach and, given the signs of the times, makes adherence to UN’s call for the total abolition of nuclear weapons a truly good prudential judgement. It is a moral choice which all countries which desire peace should make decisively and speedily.

Peter-John Pearson
Director

¹www.un.org/en/events/nuclearweaponelimination/

²www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/IPI%20Meeting%20Brief%20-%20Global%20Governance%20and%20Nuclear%20Weapons.pdf

³www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-09-26/secretary-generals-remarks-commemoration-of-the-international-day-for-the-total-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons-delivered

⁴press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/09/27/190927b.html

⁵www.armscontrol.org/print/9469

⁶<https://www.armscontrol.org/print/9469>

⁷https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont_messages/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19820607_disarmo-onu.html

⁸<https://www.ucsusa.org/take-action/nuclear-weapons-activism>

⁹www.icanw.org/campaign-news/12-states-join-the-nuclear-ban-treaty-on-international-day-for-the-total-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons-2019/

¹⁰www.icrc.org/en/document/southern-africa-states-commit-global-nuclear-ban

¹¹www.gov.za/speeches/south-africa-deposits-its-instrument-ratification-un-treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons-25

¹²www.icanw.org/campaign-news/south-africa-from-nuclear-armed-state-to-disarmament-hero/

¹³<https://www.gov.za/speeches/statement-dr-naledi-pandor-occasion-general-debate-74th-session-united-nations-general>

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