

# JustComment

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## Nuclear weapons and global signs of hope

**One would not know it from our** mass media, but there is much happening globally to address the threat posed by the over 15,000 nuclear weapons that still exist. And one wouldn't know it from our own government's statements, but Australia is a part of the problem, rather than a part of the solution, in getting rid of these worst of all weapons.

### The problem

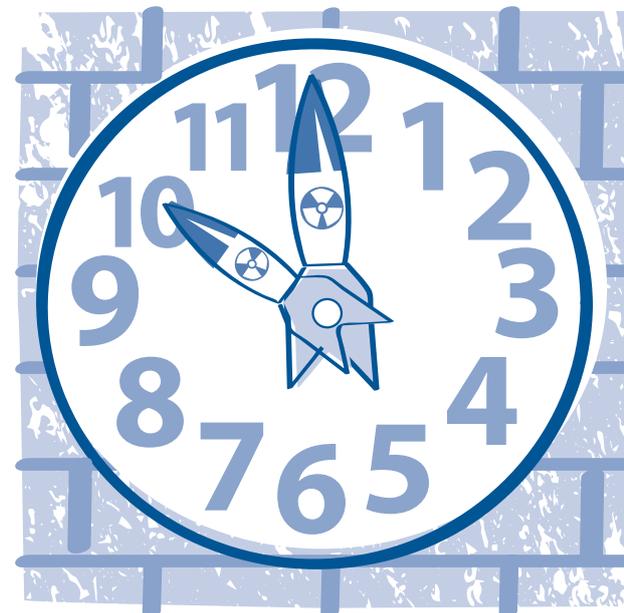
Nine nations possess nuclear weapons - Russia, the US, the UK, China, France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. Alone among these nations, the US keeps some of its weapons on other nations' territory, specifically that of NATO member states, and also offers "extended deterrence" to some of its allies including Australia. This means that Australia accepts "protection" by US nuclear weapons. Just what that means in practice is unclear and seems taboo for Australian governments, perhaps because they don't know, and perhaps because the implications of the policy – possible use of the weapons – are too horrifying to contemplate.

Globally, the ongoing risks posed by nuclear weapons are significantly greater than generally realised. With the end of the Cold War there came a complacency that persists to this day. The Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the best known marker of humanity's proximity to self-destruction, is currently set at three minutes to midnight, in recognition of the twin dangers of nuclear weapons and climate change.

The dangers are not limited to a possible deliberate nuclear detonation. A quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, approximately 1,800 US and Russian nuclear weapons are still on high alert, which means that they can be launched within 5 to 15 minutes notice, including by accident. Chatham House in the UK reports 13 instances since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when nuclear weapons were nearly used, often as a result of technical and communications failures in both the US and Russia.

Repeated studies, including that of the 1996 Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, have warned that unless nuclear weapons are abolished they will be used again. The Canberra Commission stated that "*the proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used – accidentally or by decision – defies credibility.*"

The results of any nuclear weapons use would be catastrophic beyond measure, and beyond the capacity of any meaningful humanitarian response. The combined effects of the intense blast, firestorms, gale force winds, collapsing buildings, multiple projectiles and radioactive contamination would kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people immediately and many more over the ensuing days, weeks, months and years. Rescue agencies would be able to offer the survivors very little with medical, transport, electricity, communications and other services destroyed. In addition, a nuclear war is unlikely to be



limited to one bomb, so this devastation would probably be replicated across countries or regions or globally.

A further impact of nuclear war that has received renewed attention in recent years is that of 'nuclear winter', caused by vast amounts of particulate matter from burning cities that would block sunlight and reduce rainfall and agricultural production for up to a decade, with widespread famine as a likely result.

Even before detonation, these weapons are responsible for unconscionable neglect of human need, as the nuclear-armed nations between them spend over \$100 billion on their nuclear weapons programs every year, diverting scarce resources from the provision of health care, education, food, clean water and shelter.

## Signs of hope

However the tide is turning, with what has come to be called the "Humanitarian Initiative" playing a key role. From 2013 a series of inter-governmental conferences have been held, accompanied by strong civil society collaboration, to focus attention on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. No longer can the governments of nuclear-armed nations hide behind sterile talk of military and strategic doctrines that ignore the reality of what these weapons do to people and to the environment. The nuclear-armed governments are losing control of the agenda, which is increasingly highlighting their ongoing defiance of overwhelming world opinion in favour of nuclear weapons abolition.

The conferences, held in Oslo, Nayarit (in Mexico) and Vienna from early 2013 to the end of 2014 each concluded, with increasing sense of alarm, that, because of the catastrophic effects of these weapons, they must never be used again.

After the last of the three conferences, in Vienna in December 2014, the Austrian government initiated what is now called the Humanitarian Pledge which currently has 127 signatory countries. The Pledge states "...that no national or international response capacity exists that would adequately respond to the human suffering and humanitarian harm that would result from a nuclear weapon explosion in a populated area." It calls for "effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons," referring to the fact that, unlike the situation with other weapons of mass destruction such as chemical and biological weapons, there is no treaty explicitly banning nuclear weapons.

ICAN, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, originated in

Australia where it was first launched in 2007, and it is now a strong global campaign with 440 partner organizations in 98 countries. ICAN has been the civil society partner for each of the government conferences. The campaign's goal is a nuclear weapons ban treaty, to ban the development, testing, production, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons.

It must be emphasised that a ban treaty is not being promoted with any expectation that the countries with the weapons will immediately sign it and disarm. Its purpose is to stigmatise and delegitimise the weapons so that our thinking about them – and the nations that stockpile them – changes. A change to the legal framework will have an impact far beyond those nations that sign the treaty.

The momentum towards a ban treaty is building. In February this year there was the first meeting of a new UN Open Ended Working Group that is examining the legal measures and provisions that will be needed to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. Despite its unexciting title, this group holds the best chance in decades for real progress in getting rid of the world's most destructive devices. Further meetings will be held in May and August.

## Australia's role

Australia has opposed and sought to undermine the Humanitarian Initiative process that is heading towards a nuclear weapons ban treaty. At the UN General Assembly last year, Australia voted against every resolution that was calling for the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

At the heart of Australia's resistance to a ban treaty is our continued reliance on "extended nuclear deterrence," that is, the threat of use of US nuclear weapons in our "defence." A threat can

only deter if it is credible, and the threat in this case is to incinerate cities and their inhabitants - children, women and men – indiscriminately. The Australian government refuses in international forums to agree that nuclear weapons must never be used "under any circumstances." This raises the questions: Under what circumstances does the Australian government believe nuclear weapons should be used, and against whom?

In September 2015, in an historic speech before the UN General Assembly, Pope Francis added his voice to the global call for a prohibition on nuclear weapons. He condemned the doctrine of deterrence as "an affront to the entire framework of the United Nations" which could reduce the global body to "nations united by fear and distrust."

Australia would do well to heed the Pope's message. We could make an outstanding contribution by renouncing the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons in all circumstances; this would have a powerful effect internationally and put us on the right side of history on this issue.

The actions of the 127 governments (thus far) that have endorsed the Humanitarian Pledge and are determined to "stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate" nuclear weapons are underpinned by an equally determined civil society movement. ICAN Australia welcomes the support of individuals and other organisations who will join us in getting rid of these instruments of terror.

### With thanks to Dr Sue Wareham

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