

Red Cross Alert!

Peter Maurer

This year is the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – events that have left an indelible mark on humanity’s conscience and consciousness.

I was in Hiroshima last week. I visited the Peace Memorial Museums and spoke to *hibakusha* – survivors. 70 years after the nuclear bombs were dropped on these cities, the lives of the survivors, the lives of countless people in Japan, are still overshadowed by these two watershed events in the history of modern warfare.

This year’s 70th anniversary is a forceful reminder of the catastrophic and lasting human cost of nuclear weapons. It is a stark reminder of the incineration of two cities and their inhabitants. For the survivors, it is a reminder of the burns, blindness and blast injuries that went untreated because the medical infrastructure had been destroyed; of the slow and painful deaths; of the suffering endured by those who were exposed to radiation and, 70 years later, are still being treated for cancers and other diseases.

Seventy years ago, ICRC and Japanese Red Cross staff worked in unimaginable conditions to aid the victims and relieve the suffering caused by the atomic blasts. But how could we treat victims when hospitals had been reduced to rubble and ash and their medical supplies contaminated? The Japanese Red Cross Hospital, 1.5 kilometres from the hypocentre of the Hiroshima bomb, was somehow still standing after the explosion. There, doctors and nurses from the Japanese Red Cross did what they could. But it was clearly not enough to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the blast.

Peter Maurer is president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This is what he told the diplomatic community in Geneva in February 2015, following his visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Based on these experiences, the ICRC concluded as early as September 1945 that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons were simply unacceptable. From a humanitarian perspective, nuclear weapons should be abolished. Later, the ICRC, along with the broader Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, called on States to reach an agreement to prohibit nuclear weapons.

Throughout history, humanitarian disasters have often been the catalyst for the adoption of new laws to prevent further suffering, deaths and atrocities in war. One such example was the use of poison gas in the First World War, which led to the adoption of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the subsequent banning of chemical and biological weapons.

Yet today, 70 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki – names that recall humanitarian disasters like no other – clear progress towards the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons is lacking. Nuclear weapons are the one weapon of mass destruction on which we are still confronted with a legal gap.

We recognize the efforts that have been made and the fundamental importance of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and all the commitments it contains, as well as other efforts to advance nuclear disarmament. But in light of the potential humanitarian consequences, progress in the field of disarmament is, as of now, insufficient.

Five years ago, my predecessor forcefully reiterated the ICRC's call for the non-use and elimination of nuclear weapons. The UN Security Council Summit and the US and Russian presidents had the previous year committed to 'create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons'. We were heartened that, in May 2010, all NPT States Parties recognized, for the first time, the 'catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons', and that nuclear-weapon States Parties committed to accelerating progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament and to undertaking further efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons.

I have invited the diplomatic community back here today because the ICRC is gravely concerned that these undertakings are at risk.

In April 2015, the commitment to move towards a world without nuclear weapons is again to be addressed in the framework of the NPT Review Conference. This is a pivotal moment for the Treaty and for efforts to ensure that nuclear weapons are never again used. Much has happened since the last Review Conference. There are new developments and perspectives that the ICRC believes States must take into account as they

prepare for the Conference and for any future work to address the dangers of nuclear weapons.

The Review Conference will have before it extensive and, in some areas, new information on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Thanks to the conferences held in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna, the international community now has a much clearer grasp of the risk that nuclear weapons might be used or accidentally detonated and the effects that such an event would have on people and societies around the globe, as well as on the environment. These conferences have confirmed and expanded what the ICRC learned from its experience in Hiroshima. Here are some of the key points that we take away from these meetings:

- Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power and in the scale of human suffering they cause. Their use, even on a limited scale, would have catastrophic and long-lasting consequences for human health, the environment, the climate, food production and socio-economic development.
- The health impacts of these weapons can last for decades and impact the children of survivors through genetic damage to their parents. This has been evident where nuclear weapons have been both used and tested. We could not have imagined that Japanese Red Cross hospitals would still be treating victims of cancer and leukaemia attributable to radiation from the atomic blasts – today, 70 years on.
- Seventy years after the dawn of the ‘nuclear age,’ there is no effective or feasible means of assisting a substantial portion of survivors in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear detonation, while adequately protecting those delivering assistance, in most countries or at the international level.
- The humanitarian consequences of a nuclear-weapon detonation would not be limited to the country where it occurs but would impact other countries and their populations. Thus, the continued existence of nuclear weapons and the risk of their intentional or accidental use is and must be a global concern.

Testimonies by nuclear experts and former nuclear force officers have shown that accidental nuclear-weapon detonations remain a very real danger. Malfunctions, mishaps, false alarms and misinterpreted information have nearly led to the intentional or accidental detonation of nuclear weapons on numerous occasions since 1945. The non-use of nuclear weapons over the past 70 years provides no assurance that such weapons will not be used in the future. Only the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons can prevent the severe humanitarian

consequences that would entail.

In reality, the growing number of States that possess nuclear weapons and the potential for non-State actors to acquire them or related materials increases the risk of both deliberate and accidental detonations. The fact that an estimated 1,800 nuclear warheads remain on ‘high alert’ status, ready to be launched within minutes, further amplifies those risks. Calls since the end of the Cold War to reverse such policies have, unfortunately, gone unheeded.

The information acquired since the last NPT Review Conference has increased the ICRC’s concerns about nuclear weapons. In our view, these findings have significant implications for the assessment of nuclear weapons under the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law. The new information about the health and environmental effects and the absence of an adequate assistance capacity in most countries should trigger a reassessment of nuclear weapons by all States in both legal and policy terms.

Already in 1996, in response to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (see *Spokesman 63*), the ICRC concluded that ‘it is difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the requirements of international humanitarian law’. The evidence that has emerged since only strengthens these doubts. With every new piece of information, we move further away from any hypothetical scenario where the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with international humanitarian law. This leads us, time and again, to the conclusion that the use of nuclear weapons must be prohibited and the weapons eliminated altogether.

The ICRC believes that reducing the risk of nuclear-weapon use and ensuring their elimination through a legally binding international agreement is a humanitarian imperative. Significant steps have already been taken. States with the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons have, since the end of the Cold War, significantly reduced the number of warheads that they possess. The 2010 New START treaty will further reduce the number of deployed nuclear weapons. Important steps have also been taken to increase security for nuclear materials. 115 States have signed treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones and nearly all countries have committed to refrain from testing nuclear weapons by joining the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty or by establishing moratoria on nuclear testing.

However, other trends since 2010 give reason for grave concern. There is no evidence of negotiations for ‘rapid reductions’ of nuclear weapons

and even fewer signs of momentum towards their ‘total elimination’. Reports that the pace of reduction of nuclear arsenals has slowed and of the modernization of nuclear weapons by some States raise concerns that their role in security policies is not actually being reduced and may provide incentives for proliferation.

The 70th anniversary of the first use of nuclear weapons is the moment to signal that the era of nuclear weapons is coming to an end and that the threat of these weapons will be forever banished. It is the time to draw legal, political and operational conclusions from what has been learned about those ‘catastrophic humanitarian consequences’ that States party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty recognised five years ago.

In 2011, the Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement appealed to all States ‘to ensure that nuclear weapons are never again used’ and ‘to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons through a legally binding international agreement, based on existing commitments and international obligations’. I echo that call here today. The ICRC also appeals to States to fulfil the commitments contained in Article 6 of the NPT by establishing a time-bound framework to negotiate a legally binding agreement – and to consider the form that such an agreement could take. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and current trends are too serious to ignore. The prohibition and elimination of these weapons through a legally binding agreement is the only guarantee that they will never be used again.

States Parties should make the NPT Review Conference in May 2015 a turning point for decision-making and progress in this area.

Until the very last nuclear weapon is eliminated, more also needs to be done to diminish the immediate risks of intentional or accidental nuclear detonations. We call on States that possess nuclear weapons and their allies to take further concrete steps to reduce the role and significance of nuclear weapons in their military plans, doctrines and policies. We urge nuclear-armed States to reduce the number of warheads on high alert and to be more transparent about action taken to prevent accidental detonations. Many of these steps derive from long-standing political commitments and multilateral action plans and should be followed through as a matter of urgency.

Protecting humanity from the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons requires courage, sustained commitment and concerted action. Today’s complex security environment highlights both the challenges and necessity of such action. Nuclear weapons are often

presented as promoting security, particularly during times of international instability. But weapons that risk catastrophic and irreversible humanitarian consequences cannot seriously be viewed as protecting civilians or humanity as a whole.

We know now more than ever before that the risks are too high, the dangers too real. It is time for States, and all those of us in a position to influence them, to act with urgency and determination to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end.

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In Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park

The heat of summer is oppressive.

Children pass by in groups, chattering.
They wear school outfits –
black pants or skirts and white shirts.

Some groups are wearing yellow caps.
They stop at Sadako's statue and,
in lilting voices, sing songs with words
I cannot understand.

When they finish their songs, they bow,
paying tribute to one of their own, Sadako,
forever young, a child of the bomb.

Though nearly seven decades have passed,
I feel guilty for what my country did here.

To whom can I apologize? To whom must
I apologize? It doesn't matter.
They have already forgiven, long ago.

David Krieger

Wake Up! David Krieger's new poetry collection,
published by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation,
\$14.95 ISBN 978150098874 6

At a First Aid Post

You

Who have no channels for tears when you weep
 No lips through which words can issue when you howl
 No skin for your fingers to grip with when you writhe in torment

You

Your squirming limbs all smeared with blood and slimy sweat and lymph
 Between your closed lids the glaring eyeballs show only a thread of white
 On your pale swollen bellies only the perished elastic that held up
 your drawers
 You who can no longer feel shame at exposing your sheltered sex
 O who could believe that
 Only minutes ago
 You were all schoolgirls fresh and appealing

In the scorched and raw Hiroshima
 Out of dark shuddering flames
 You no longer the human creatures you had been
 Scrambled and crawled one after the other
 Dragged yourselves along as far as this open ground
 To bury in the dusts of agony
 Your frizzled hair on skulls almost as bald as heads of Buddhist saints

Why should you have to suffer like this
 Why suffer like this
 What is the reason
 What reason
 And you
 Do not know
 How you look nor
 What your humanity has been turned into

You are remembering
 Simply remembering
 Those who until this morning were
 Your fathers mothers brothers sisters
 (Would any of them recognise you now if they met you)

Remembering your homes where you used to sleep wake eat
 (In a single flash all the flowers on their hedges were blasted
 And no one knows where their ashes lie)
 Remembering remembering
 Here with your fellow-creatures who one by one gradually moving
 Remembering
 Those days when
 You were daughters
 Daughters of humankind

*One of four Atomic Bomb poems by Toge Sankichi
 Translated by James Kirkup
 with help and advice from Fumiko Miura and Akiko Takemoto*

' ... It was this passion for oriental paintings that led me to visit, in London, the first exhibition of paintings devoted to the themes of atomic bomb horrors. They were by Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu, and were shown in Europe for the first time in 1955. These vividly realistic paintings made such a profound impression upon me that I went straight back to my room and wrote in longhand, at a single draft, the poem, 'Ghosts, Fire, Water' which I took straight back to the gallery, and laid it in the book of visitors' comments. Then I returned home and typed it out without any alterations and sent it to Kingsley Martin at *The New Statesman*, which had already published some of my work. It was rejected, without comment. By that time, I had received a response from the woman who had organised the exhibition, expressing her admiration and gratitude, and urging me to send it to British newspapers and periodicals. I sent out many copies but they were all either ignored or politely rejected. However, I managed to include it in my next volume of poems, *The Descent into the Cave* (Oxford University Press), two years later, in 1957. There were no reviews mentioning the poem.'

*James Kirkup
 Andorra, April 2004
 No More Hiroshimas
 Spokesman £6.99*