

COMMENT: Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons held Feb 13-14 in Nayarit, Mexico

Humanity Versus the Bomb

<http://opencanada.org/features/the-think-tank/comments/humanity-versus-the-bomb/>

Paul Meyer | February 25, 2014



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Although the natural beauty of the venue belied the subject matter, representatives of 146 states and 120 NGOs met February 13-14 at the Mexican coastal resort of Nayarit for the **Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons**. Hosted by Mexico, the conference followed an initial gathering in Norway in March 2013 in which 127 states were represented. Both were inspired by a single, unprecedented reference in the concluding document of the 2010 Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) expressing deep concern over the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of any use of nuclear weapons.

On one hand, this was a statement of the obvious, but on the other it introduced a new “human security” perspective to intergovernmental proceedings that hitherto had been dominated by the cold, clinical jargon associated with discussions of international security. This recognition also resonated with the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement that adopted a resolution at its 2011 global meeting stressing the incompatibility of nuclear weapons with international humanitarian law. As the world’s foremost humanitarian actor, the Red Cross also noted the inadequacy of any capacity to respond to the detonation of a nuclear weapon and the necessity to eliminate these weapons as the sole guarantee that they will never be used.

At the Nayarit Conference, the grim facts concerning the impact of a nuclear weapon explosion were laid out in a series of expert presentations. First there was the moving testimony of the *hibakusha*—the survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—who had witnessed firsthand the incredible

destruction of this weapon that ignored any distinction between combatant and civilian, robbing all of their human dignity. Next, scientists described the “nuclear winter” effect that would accompany even a minor nuclear exchange with temperatures dropping by 7 to 8 degrees Celsius and an associated decline of grain production that would almost certainly jeopardize global food supplies. Moving from the consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation to the risks of one occurring, security experts including Eric Schlosser, author of *Command and Control* detailed some of the hundreds of accidents involving the United States’ nuclear weapons that have become public and extrapolated these findings to the nuclear arsenals of other more opaque states such as Russia and China. Preliminary findings from a Chatham House study “**Too Close for Comfort**” on cases of near nuclear use arriving from technical errors and misperception were similarly chilling and reminded participants that human frailties being what they were, the 17,000 nuclear weapons in existence today represented an unacceptable threat to humanity.

Conspicuous in their absence from the Nayarit conference were the five nuclear weapon states party to the NPT (India and Pakistan, two non-NPT states participated). Despite having been parties to the 2010 NPT Review Conference conclusions, the P5 are uncomfortable with the focus on the humanitarian impact of the nuclear weapons they still cling to. They have subsequently chosen the rather crude tactic of boycotting the Oslo and Nayarit meetings, as if by ignoring the gatherings the whole inconvenient enterprise would disappear.

Part of the reason for the P5’s refusal to attend is that they have so little to point to with regard to accomplishing their NPT commitments on nuclear disarmament. The chief multilateral forum for negotiating disarmament agreements, the Conference on Disarmament, has been blocked for 15 years. During this period the Conference has been unable to undertake any official work on its agenda. The Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) still has not entered into force, 18 years after its conclusion. The negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) has not even begun despite claims over 20 years that it is a top priority. The nuclear weapon states have maintained risky high-alert launch postures, modernized their nuclear arsenals, and still affirm key roles for nuclear weapons in their security policies while urging others to continue to practice nuclear abstinence.

Tolerance for this inequitable situation is wearing thin among the 185 states that foreswore nuclear weapons via the NPT . The recognition that any nuclear detonation, “by accident or design,” would inflict catastrophic consequences is leading these states to seek alternative ways to advance nuclear disarmament and reject the stalling tactics of nuclear weapon states. The Austrian representative, in announcing his government’s decision to host a third conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons before the end of 2014 said, “nuclear weapons are relics of the Cold War that we must overcome.” It is now time for the P5 to engage constructively with their non-nuclear partners and civil society to realize the goal of a world without nuclear weapons that they all have affirmed and committed to.