

Project Description

Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons

Phase II: Study on Challenges to United Nations Emergency Preparedness, Humanitarian Coordination, and Response to Nuclear Weapons Detonations

One finding from the recent international conference on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons held in Oslo in March 2013, drawing in part from presentations by United Nations humanitarian and development agencies, was that “it is unlikely that any state or international body could address the immediate humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapon detonation in an adequate manner and provide sufficient assistance to those affected. Moreover, it might not be possible to establish such capacities, even if it were attempted”.

As was clear in some of their statements at the Oslo Conference, beyond acknowledging these deficiencies United Nations agencies have not recently given studied thought to how, specifically, the nature and characteristics of nuclear weapons detonations would affect United Nations efforts to assist civilian populations in need. Nor has much attention been given to the types of decision-making challenges that would confront the United Nations in such an event before such responses could even be realistically contemplated—although there has been study of future United Nations response in the context of nuclear accidents. In this regard, as was also noted at Oslo, the consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation would differ from those of natural disasters or nuclear power accidents in major respects and, indeed, pose unique challenges for provision of humanitarian assistance and, in the longer term, development aid.

Although the international humanitarian system would probably be unable to respond effectively to a nuclear weapon detonation in a populated area, the United Nations and other actors are still likely to be called upon in such an event. Therefore, greater thinking about the issues above and their impacts on United Nations response capacity could prompt improved contingency planning and other policy responses. Ultimately, it could well contribute to the saving of lives if a nuclear weapon detonation were to occur, even if remedial humanitarian action on its own would be inadequate.



The study

From August 2013, researchers at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research are carrying out a 10-month study aimed at better understanding challenges to United Nations emergency preparedness, and humanitarian coordination and response in the event of a nuclear weapon detonation. This UNIDIR work is in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The study is the second phase of the Institute's project on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons under UNIDIR's Security and Society programme. This project is being carried out with the financial support of the Governments of Norway and Ireland.

Study aims

Specifically, the research is intended to:

- map out the likely implications of a nuclear weapon detonation—as distinct from other types of disasters—for effective, United Nations humanitarian response, in view of factors unique to nuclear weapons that would distinguish challenges created by such an event from other types of nuclear disaster;
- contribute to a better understanding of likely challenges for the United Nations and other humanitarian and development actors; and
- ensure that the United Nations can contribute to the emerging international discourse on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons.

Outputs

- It is intended that preliminary findings from the research will be available by mid-February 2014.
- The study's findings will be published by UNIDIR, in cooperation with UNDP and OCHA, in mid-2014.
- Findings from the research will be presented to relevant forums as appropriate.

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