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Text of remarks by Dr. John Borrie* at the second conference on humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, Nayarit, Mexico (14 February 2014)

Preliminary findings from UNIDIR research on challenges to United Nations-coordinated humanitarian response to nuclear weapon detonation events

On behalf of UNIDIR it gives me great pleasure to be here speaking to you today. I'd like to thank the Government of Mexico for this opportunity, and for organizing this important conference.

Originally, my presentation was intended to follow that of my colleague from the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Dr. Simon Bagshaw. Unfortunately, Simon is unable to be here today due to severe weather in New York. In his stead, I will cover some of his remarks in my talk, and we hope to distribute the OCHA statement.

We've learned at this conference that, depending on its size, the detonation of even a single nuclear weapon in an urban area could cause tens or even hundreds of thousands of casualties, massive physical destruction and have far reaching social and economic consequences. It is an understatement to say that it would generate considerable humanitarian need.

It would almost certainly require the services and expertise of all UN humanitarian agencies and beyond, including the ICRC and, importantly, humanitarian non-governmental organizations as implementing partners, on which UN agencies depend.

Major implications are likely for each of the main sectors of humanitarian response: emergency shelter, camp coordination and camp management, health, water and sanitation, food security, nutrition, protection, telecommunications and logistics.

There would be an urgent need to provide specialized medical assistance in view of number of severe burns cases and exposure to radiation, and more basic medical services to respond to injuries resulting from blast and fragmentation.

A high degree of psychological trauma would be expected in such circumstances. This would also require specialist support.

Emergency shelter would be a priority given widespread displacement that would likely occur and massive destruction of existing housing and other buildings that might otherwise function as shelter.

* John Borrie is a senior researcher and policy advisor at UNIDIR. See also remarks at the Nayarit conference by his project colleague Tim Caughley (UNIDIR senior resident fellow) on *The evolving discourse on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons*. Online: www.unidir.org/files/medias/pdfs/the-evolving-discourse-on-the-humanitarian-impact-of-nuclear-weapon-detonations-tim-caughley-eng-0-548.pdf.

It is also possible that displacement would not be contained within borders of the States concerned. We would see population movements into neighbouring States who may also request international assistance to respond to shelter and other emergency needs.

Survivors would need immediate access to uncontaminated food, potable water and proper sanitation facilities to prevent the outbreak of disease. Protection services would also be required, including to ensure safety of unaccompanied or orphaned children and other vulnerable groups such as older persons and persons with disabilities. There would also be a heightened risk of sexual and forms of violence in overcrowded shelters that would need to be monitored and addressed.

The extent of humanitarian need would be huge. This need would possibly have to be met on a large scale for a long period of time as UNDP and others pointed out yesterday. And that's just for a single detonation, let alone multiple-detonation scenarios.

So, to what extent is it realistic to expect that UN humanitarian agencies and partners could respond to those needs at the present time if a nuclear detonation event happened?

To examine this question, in August 2013, UNIDIR commenced research into the challenges to UN emergency preparedness, humanitarian coordination and response to nuclear weapon detonations. The work, which is funded by Norway and Ireland, is being undertaken in cooperation with OCHA and UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. A published study will become available in July 2014.

The study investigates the March 2013 Oslo conference finding 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."

The Oslo finding of course applies not only to the UN, but to other international entities. We note the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's pioneering work in this area on NRBC response. The ICRC's work is especially invaluable to our own efforts, and we hope that it will share a few words in that regard during this conference.

Another point is that while this study focuses on humanitarian response to the victims, there are also the concurrent challenges of staff protection, and of maintaining other humanitarian operations the UN is engaged in. These are not trivial challenges.

A wide variety of nuclear weapon detonation scenarios are conceivable, and many variables are at play. It means caution is necessary in generalizing about the severity and nature of the human consequences. Our research findings are still preliminary in nature, and may change before the study is published in the middle of 2014.

Our basic finding is that the Oslo conference finding is valid in most plausible scenarios involving a nuclear weapon detonation event in a densely populated area.

I now want to share with you five supporting preliminary findings.

Preliminary finding #1

For the UN to be called up to coordinate humanitarian assistance suggests a nuclear weapon detonation event is beyond a state's own capacity to respond effectively to assist the victims. It means that severe and widespread harm has already occurred, or is occurring.

- Anything that the UN system can do at this point is responding to an already serious level of harm.

- This may seem like an obvious point. But it is worth reflecting that in order for response to be necessary, the situation is already a disaster.

Preliminary finding #2

The UN is unlikely to be able to offer much humanitarian assistance in the immediate aftermath since, even in a best case situation, it would probably take days or weeks to deploy. Moreover, it would depend on the affected state requesting it, or appropriate international decision-making, to be enacted.

- Most experts seem to agree that the immediate needs of the victims in a nuclear weapon detonation event will fall on local and national authorities to the extent they still function. Much of the expert literature in this area assumes even that help will take days or longer to arrive – let alone international assistance.
- This has implications for the kinds of role a UN coordinated response can play.
- The way that ‘second wave’ crisis issues such as handling the displaced – large numbers of vulnerable people on the move without assured food, shelter or medical care – will make a difference to the overall level of harm.
- As well as direct death, injury and destruction from the detonation event itself, there will almost certainly be significant disruption and fear.
- And the needs of affected people and communities will evolve in the weeks, months and years following the detonation event.

The UN has a good deal of experience in coordinating humanitarian response to sudden onset complex disasters in the form of the humanitarian cluster system, coordinated by the UN’s Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This is can be a powerful and flexible system. However:

Preliminary finding #3

At present there appear to be a number of foreseeable challenges to prompt and effective use of the humanitarian cluster system in the context of a nuclear weapon detonation event.

There are several foreseeable challenges here:

- Until now, no attention has been paid to what the particular characteristics of nuclear detonation events would be in a plausible range of contexts, and what the humanitarian consequences would be.
- Moreover, there appears to have been no specific planning for nuclear weapon detonation events, either within the components of the UN system, or at an inter-agency level. While there have been international exercises in the recent past on scenarios such as radiological ‘dirty bombs’ or chemical weapons, there have been no equivalents to understand how to coordinate humanitarian response to nuclear detonations.
- This is important: a nuclear weapon detonation event will create a large zone of destruction unlike most civil nuclear incidents. But it will pose radiological issues, for instance in terms of treatment of large numbers of contaminated casualties, and issues around protecting populations from fall out.
- There is no focal point within the humanitarian system for planning for response to nuclear weapon detonation events.
- There has been no considered designation of specialized responsibilities such as radiation

monitoring and radiation decontamination at the field level in support of humanitarian operations in the event of nuclear weapon detonations.

- The ability to measure fall out levels on a localized basis, for instance, would be important to ensuring the safety both of humanitarian personnel and affected populations.
- It has been observed that some military units possess such capabilities, but as the ICRC has observed, those units' capabilities are oriented toward force protection. And, to our knowledge, standing arrangements don't currently exist for humanitarian support in this fashion.
- There currently is no clarification as to whether and how present agency mandates would apply in the context of nuclear weapon detonation events.
 - While many in the UN system assume that existing response mechanisms for civil radiological incidents would simply carry over, this does not appear to be the case.
 - For instance, some specialized agencies view their mandated responsibilities to apply to civil radiological emergencies but not cases of nuclear weapon use.
- This is an important issue, because some of the personnel we interviewed as part of our research were under the mistaken impression that such arrangements exist. They don't.
- While we have no doubt the system would swing into action as swiftly as it could, developing these arrangements in the heat of the crisis is not ideal, and would take time – with ample chance of confusion or misinterpretation that would be likely to impede the most timely and effective response.
- There are also not standing arrangements for coordination between the UN humanitarian system and relevant national authorities in the specific case of a nuclear weapon detonation event.
- Finally, while it is likely that the UN cluster system would take the lead in coordinating humanitarian response, we just don't really know, because collectively the UN has not yet confronted the question.

Preliminary finding #4

Threat of further detonation of nuclear weapons could vastly complicate decision making about the nature and scale of humanitarian coordination and response.

- In the hours, days or even weeks following a nuclear weapon detonation event its origin or the culprits (if it is deliberate) might not be known.
 - Such uncertainty could create further nuclear crises of its own.
- In terms of risk assessment, humanitarian actors may feel it is too unsafe to send humanitarian relief to help the affected.
- The state (or states) affected might be unwilling to accept relief until the environment is sufficiently 'secure'.
- States in a position to offer assistance coordinated by the UN might be unwilling to do so if they fear further nuclear weapon detonation events are plausible.

- This could exacerbate suffering for those directly affected or displaced.

Preliminary finding #5

Nuclear weapon detonation events are worthy of serious consideration in coordination and response terms, since this could significantly reduce the human suffering that would arise, even if there is not much the UN system could necessarily do for victims in the immediate aftermath.

- Much of the literature we have studied as part of our research frames nuclear weapon detonation events in populated areas as very low probability events – albeit events with severe consequences.
- Most of these studies were, until the 1990s, focused on the scenario of a global thermonuclear war or, after 2001, on detonation of a single low-yield improvised nuclear device in a city.
- From our point-of-view, beyond the (possibly circumstantial) fact that such detonation events haven't occurred to date, it's not clear what the basis for this is. We do not believe it's a justification for failing to plan for response (however inadequate) and redoubling prevention efforts.
- More information is coming to light that shows a broader range of potential causes of detonation events than previously usually considered.
- Beside the scenarios just mentioned, risks still remain of deliberate state use of nuclear weapons, human miscalculation, mishap, or accidents involving state-held nuclear weapons.
- Such risks extend to the detonation of multiple explosive nuclear devices – not just a single weapon – and in multiple places.
- In view of that, we believe that care should be taken to distinguish between a low probability event, and a no probability event.
- That nuclear weapon detonation events have not happened yet should not lull us into a false sense of complacency about their risks and humanitarian consequences.