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Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons
Tracing Notions about Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences

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Summary

The unanimous expression by the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of deep concern at the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences" of any use of nuclear weapons has given new impetus to the cause of nuclear disarmament. This paper examines the notion of catastrophic humanitarian consequences and the origins of similar expressions as orienting concepts in the context of use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in particular.

Background

On 28 May 2010, on the final day of the NPT's Eighth Review Conference, NPT states parties adopted "Conclusions and recommendations for follow-on actions"[1] including elements on nuclear disarmament, and the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons" (see box 1).

Box 1

"I. Nuclear disarmament

In pursuit of the full, effective and urgent implementation of article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and paragraphs 3 and 4(c) of the 1995 decision entitled "Principles and objectives for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament", and building upon the practical steps agreed to in the Final Document of the 2000 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Conference agrees on the following action plan on nuclear disarmament which includes concrete steps for the total elimination of nuclear weapons:

A. Principles and objectives

[i to iv]

v. The Conference expresses its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and reaffirms the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law".

1 Extracted from 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, *Final Document*, document NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I)*, 2010.

Following long-standing NPT practice, the decision to adopt these "conclusions", "recommendations", "principles and objectives", and "follow-on actions" was taken by consensus; that is, without the expressed, formal objection of any of the treaty's 189 states parties.

Significance of the expression of concern

The Review Conference's adoption of this expression of deep concern of all of the NPT's state parties contains a number of implications, which this paper explores. Its analysis is structured into three sections:

A. evolution of the notion of humanitarian consequences in law;

B. humanitarian consequences: current context; and

C. factors contributing to recent changes in disarmament discourse and strategy.

A. Evolution of the notion of humanitarian consequences in law

The concern about humanitarian consequences expressed by the NPT parties in 2010 has several dimensions. In historical terms within the NPT, "catastrophic humanitarian consequences" is in part a restatement of the opening paragraph of the preamble to the treaty that speaks of the "devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war".

More broadly, history reflects in various ways the horrors of the use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. (These are often described as WMD, though it is important to recognize that no authoritative definition of this term exists.) The 1925 Geneva Protocol,[2] which prohibits the use of chemical and biological weapons in war, approached the humanitarian considerations at stake in a manner that relied on then-vivid memories of gas warfare in the trenches of the First World War. The preamble to the protocol reflects simply but profoundly that, "the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials or devices, *has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world*" (emphasis added).

The preambles to both the Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC)[3] and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)[4] recognize the significance of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The preamble to the BTWC, in particular, recorded that its state parties were conscious also of the contribution that that protocol had made, and by inference would continue to make, in mitigating the horrors of war. Expressing their determination, for the sake of all mankind, to exclude completely the possibility of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins being used as weapons, the parties declared that they are "*Convinced that such use would be repugnant to the conscience of mankind and that no effort should be spared to minimise this risk*" (emphasis added).

These expressions reflect a humanitarian thread that extends back to the Declaration Renouncing the Use, in Time of War, of Explosive Projectiles Under 400 Grammes Weight.

2 See www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Bio/1925GenevaProtocol.shtml.

3 See http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/t/bwc/text.

4 See www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention.

The St. Petersburg Declaration of 1868 was the first formal agreement prohibiting the use of a specific weapon in war. It banned use of a newly developed "exploding" bullet designed to destroy ammunition wagons, but which also exploded upon contact with the human body causing terrible wounds. It set out the principle that the use of arms, projectiles, and material of a nature to cause unnecessary suffering is prohibited.[5] Its humanitarian considerations are stated very clearly (see box 2).[6] In the view of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the St. Petersburg Declaration continues to have the force of law.

Box 2

"an International Military Commission … having by common agreement fixed the technical limits at which the necessities of war ought to yield to the requirements of humanity, [declared as follows]:

Considering: That the progress of civilization should have the effect of alleviating as much as possible the calamities of war;

That *the only legitimate object which States should endeavour to accomplish during war is to weaken the military forces of the enemy*;

That for this purpose it is sufficient to disable the greatest possible number of men;

That this object would be exceeded by the employment of arms which uselessly aggravate the sufferings of disabled men, or render their death inevitable;

That the employment of such arms would, therefore, be contrary to the laws of humanity" (emphasis added).

Humanitarian considerations also underlie treaties prohibiting the use of gases including the Hague Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 29 July 1899[7] and the Treaty of Versailles of 28 June 1919. Humanitarian principles have of course also been enshrined in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 on the law of armed conflict (see article 3 common to all four conventions). Additional Protocol I to those treaties makes it clear that the right of parties to a conflict to choose methods or means of warfare is not unlimited.[8] The protocol also stipulates that it is prohibited to employ weapons of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering or which may be expected to cause wide-spread, long-term, and severe damage to the natural environment.

Attention should also be drawn to the opening words of the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations.[9] The Charter expresses the determination "to save succeeding

5 See www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/INTRO/130?OpenDocument.

6 See www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/FULL/130?OpenDocument.

7 See especially these words in the preamble to Section II Laws and Customs of War on Land: "Until a more complete code of the laws of war is issued, the High Contracting Parties think it right to declare that in cases not included in the Regulations adopted by them, populations and belligerents remain under the protection and empire of the principles of international law, as they result from the usages established between civilized nations, from the laws of humanity, and the requirements of the public conscience", www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=9FE084CDAC63D10FC12563CD00515C4D.

8 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 1977, art. 35; see also arts. 48, 51.

9 See www.un.org/en/documents/charter/preamble.shtml.

generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small".

Two other examples of treatment of humanitarian considerations in the United Nations context warrant mention. The General Assembly annually expresses the continuing and overwhelming support of the international community for measures to uphold the authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Moreover, these resolutions are generally (though not always) adopted by consensus; that is, with the support even of states not party to the protocol.[10] Finally, General Assembly resolution 1653 should be recalled. That measure—passed in 1961 by a vote of 55 to 20 with 26 abstentions—declared that the "use of nuclear … weapons would exceed even the scope of war and cause indiscriminate suffering and destruction to mankind".

B. Humanitarian consequences: current context

Turning from this brief historical exploration to the current context, why is it that the humanitarian perspective on the use of nuclear weapons has returned to prominence? Since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, nuclear weapons have not been detonated in active conflict. Yet awareness about the loss of life and devastation caused has not faded away in the collective memory. The nuclear accidents at Chernobyl and Fukushima have served as reminders of the hazards to people and their environment of radioactive release. But the relevance of these civil nuclear disasters to the nuclear weapons discourse is not necessarily accepted by all states. Even some nuclear disarmament advocates seem reluctant to expound on perceived linkages for fear this will confuse the debate.

Heightened attention to the notion of humanitarian consequences of the use of a nuclear weapon stems to some extent from the high political profile given to nuclear weapons in recent years. An obvious example is the speech by United States President Obama in Prague on 5 April 2009 in which he said:

> I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. … One nuclear weapon exploded in one city—be it New York or Moscow, Islamabad or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague—could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequences might be—for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.

The negotiation by the Russian Federation and the United States of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), and issues with the arsenal of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran's possible development of nuclear weapons have all served to keep nuclear arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, and nuclear disarmament in the headlines. Indeed, concerns about proliferation have helped bring the debate on the elimination of nuclear arsenals more to the fore than at any time since the vast majority of states signed the NPT in 1968 in recognition that the

10 See General Assembly, *Measures to Uphold the Authority of the 1925 Geneva Protocol*, UN document A/C.1/67/L.15, 18 October 2012.

world would be a safer place without nuclear weapons. But advocates for the abolition of nuclear weapons are still striving for the means to make this point more compelling to a public distracted by a range of other challenges to security.

This situation may be changing. The growth in the public consciousness of humanitarian perspectives on nuclear weapons was given a significant boost by the resolution of the ICRC Council of Delegates of 26 November 2011.[11] The Council placed emphasis not only on the "incalculable human suffering that can be expected to result from any use of nuclear weapons" but also on "the lack of any adequate humanitarian response capacity" to respond to the casualties of such use. The Council, noting "the absolute imperative" to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, stated that it found it "difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law, in particular the rules of distinction, precaution and proportionality".

Mention should also be made of efforts of states to build on the 2010 expression of concern by the NPT's state parties, notably the sixteen-state[12] statement delivered in Vienna by Switzerland in May 2012 at the first preparatory committee meeting in the current review cycle of the NPT. A similar statement[13] was delivered on behalf of 34 United Nations Member States and the Holy See during the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly in October 2012. And in a joint public statement in September 2010, the foreign ministers of the NPT lobby group of 10 states known as the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI)[14] publicly echoed the Review Conference's concern about humanitarian consequences.

These initiatives have emerged against a difficult multilateral backdrop. There remains chronic deadlock in the multilateral disarmament "machinery" and an absence of recent steps to negotiate an agreement or agreements leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons. The Conference on Disarmament (CD), a standing body in which all states possessing nuclear weapons are members, is widely seen as the logical venue for undertaking such negotiations. Deep divisions in the CD over the terms of mandates for dealing with its four "core issues"[15] have prevented it from undertaking any substantive work of any kind since the negotiation in the Conference of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) from 1994 to 1996. This has given rise to initiatives to set in train processes on nuclear disarmament and fissile materials outside the CD, such as the resolutions tabled during the sixty-seventh session of the General Assembly by Canada, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and a cross-regional group supporting an initiative by Austria, Mexico, and Norway.[16]

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11 See www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/resolution/council-delegates-resolution-1-2011.htm.

12 Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Egypt, the Holy See, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa, and Switzerland.

13 See www.acronym.org.uk/official-and-govt-documents/joint-statement-humanitarian-dimension-nuclear-disarmament-un-first-committee-2012.

14 Statement of 22 September 2010 made in New York by the Foreign Ministers of Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. NB: Several of these states are among the group of 16 referred to above.

15 These are nuclear disarmament, fissile materials, prevention of an arms race in outer space, and negative security assurances.

16 See respectively General Assembly, *High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament*, UN document A/C.1/67/L.19, 18 October 2012; General Assembly, *Treaty Banning the Production of Fissile Material for Nuclear Weapons or Other Nuclear Explosive Devices*, UN document A/C.1/67/L.41, 19 October 2012; and General Assembly, *Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations*, UN

Canada's (annual) proposal on fissile material took a different tack from previous years and included a request for the United Nations Secretary-General to establish a group of government experts (GGE) drawn from 25 states to meet in Geneva for 2 weeks in 2014 and 2015 to make recommendations (but "not negotiate") on possible aspects for a treaty banning the production of such material. The other two proposals from the sixty-seventh session both dealt with nuclear disarmament. Under the NAM resolution (adopted without opposing votes and with only 5 abstentions), this topic will be the subject of a high-level meeting of the General Assembly on 26 September 2013 "to contribute to the goal of nuclear disarmament".

The measure tabled by Austria, Mexico, and Norway sought the establishment of an open-ended working group (OEWG) to meet for up to 15 working days in Geneva in 2013 "to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons". The OEWG will report primarily to the General Assembly, although its report is to be copied to the CD as well as to the United Nations Disarmament Commission. The OEWG will not proceed under the CD's sole decision-making rule—consensus—but under those of the General Assembly, which, as laid down in Article 18 of the Charter of the United Nations, contemplate voting. As for the vote on the proposal itself, the measure easily carried in the First Committee with the support of 133 members. There were 4 against (France, the Russia Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and 20 abstaining (including China, Pakistan, India, and Israel).

For those states that are ready to engage directly in the issues rather than merely debate how best to deal with them, new avenues have clearly opened up. For instance, in 2013 on nuclear disarmament, there will be an OEWG, a high-level meeting of the General Assembly, and a conference scheduled for March in Oslo on the humanitarian impact of a nuclear weapon detonation (mentioned below).

C. Factors contributing to recent changes in disarmament discourse and strategy

Approaches to multilateral arms control and disarmament have long been dominated by security concepts focusing on external threats to states and, in particular, threats posed by other states. Traditional multilateral approaches to security, especially in arms control, were generally geared to addressing state concerns on weapons, weapons systems, and delivery mechanisms rather than on preventing or ameliorating their potential impact on individuals or communities.[17] Nowadays, traditional forms of interstate military conflict are in some part being supplanted by insecurity and conflict associated with terrorism, trafficking in people and illicit goods, ethnic and communal conflict, to the total breakdown of order in failed states.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its *Human Development Report 1994*, published shortly after the end of the Cold War, argued that the concept of security had "for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external

document A/C.1/67/L.46, 19 October 2012.

17 J. Borrie, "Rethinking multilateral negotiations: disarmament as humanitarian action", in J. Borrie and V. Martin Randin (eds.), *Alternative Approaches in Multilateral Decision Making: Disarmament as Humanitarian Action*, UNIDIR, 2005.

aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust. It has been related more to nation-states than to people".[18] The report also noted that the "superpowers were locked in an ideological struggle—fighting a cold war all over the world. The developing nations, having won their independence only recently, were sensitive to any real or perceived threats to their fragile national identities. Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives". (An extract from that report directly apposite to this paper appears in box 3.)

Box 3

"Fifty years ago, Albert Einstein summed up the discovery of atomic energy with characteristic simplicity: 'Everything changed.' He went on to predict: 'We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.' Although nuclear explosions devastated Nagasaki and Hiroshima, humankind has survived its first critical test of preventing worldwide nuclear devastation. But five decades later, we need another profound transition in thinking—from nuclear security to human security".

Taking the perspective that disarmament and arms control norms are integral to promoting human security and to protecting the individual from violence and insecurity, since 2000 the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) has contributed to the international policy debate on weapons curbs by carrying out research concerning the notion of "disarmament as humanitarian action". "Humanitarian action" countenanced activities that stemmed not only from rules and principles of international humanitarian law but also from broader humanitarian considerations. Thinking at the human scale—in terms of human security and humanitarian approaches—and not just at the scale of states was seen to be a promising new dynamic for multilateral approaches, offering a test of acceptability through the notion of unacceptable harm resulting from the use of a particular weapon system.[19]

UNIDIR's central thesis was that humanitarian perspectives could add value to multilateral negotiation processes on international security. This was seen to be the case in the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and to some extent in the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War in 2003 and in the context of combating illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.[20] The humanitarian perspective was a significant factor in the negotiation of an Arms Trade Treaty.[21] Humanitarian concerns strikingly underpinned efforts resulting in the Cluster Munitions Convention in 2008.[22]

The notion of humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons has been seized upon by civil society as well as by some governments. Already active in promoting the

18 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994*, 1994, p. 24.

19 See the four volumes of published work of UNIDIR's project Disarmament as Humanitarian Action: Making Multilateral Negotiations Work, available at www.unidir.org/bdd/fiche-activite.php?ref_activite=275.

20 See the preamble to the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, 2001.

21 M. Bromley, N. Cooper, and P. Holtom, "The UN Arms Trade Treaty: arms export controls, the human security agenda and the lessons of history", *International Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 5, 2012.

22 J. Borrie, *Unacceptable Harm: A History of How the Treaty to Ban Cluster Munitions Was Won*, UNIDIR, 2009.

devaluation[23] of nuclear weapons as a pivotal element of military doctrines in nuclear-weapon-possessing states, non-governmental organization (NGO) campaigners active in nuclear disarmament appear to welcome any new leverage for their cause. In a recent publication, the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy commented that a "different, humanitarian-centred approach has begun to reframe nuclear debates, and looks likely to transform the non-proliferation and disarmament landscape in the next decade".[24] This development is attributed to factors such as increased attention to international humanitarian law in relations among states, and a growing public awareness driven by scientists and physicians of the impact of any use of nuclear weapons on the global environment, climate, and agricultural resources.

Both factors featured in an influential statement by then-President of the ICRC Jakob Kellenberger, delivered just before the 2010 NPT Review Conference. He drew attention to the threats nuclear weapons "pose to the environment, to future generations, and indeed to the survival of humanity".[25] He added that the ICRC therefore appealed to all states to ensure that such weapons are never used again, "regardless of their views on the legality of such use".[26]

The ICRC is making the point that a humanitarian approach is related to, but not necessarily reliant on international humanitarian law. That is, a humanitarian basis for curbing weapons goes beyond the legal to encompass moral and political imperatives as well, and is founded upon concern about the effects of the weapons (for instance, on civilians, or superfluous and unnecessary suffering of combatants). Together, these are what constitute the humanitarian imperative.[27]

While the NPT Review Conference's expression of concern on humanitarian consequences falls short of stating that nuclear weapons violate international humanitarian law, it squarely questions the legality of the use of nuclear weapons because international humanitarian law is "specifically intended to prevent catastrophic humanitarian consequences from warfare".[28] It is not the intention of this paper to examine the rules of international humanitarian law beyond underlining the points drawn from the earlier historical analysis that:

- the choice of means and methods of warfare is not unlimited; and
- the consideration most relevant to any weapon's use is a humanitarian one—where use would be "justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilized world" or "repugnant to the conscience of mankind", to quote the 1925 Geneva Protocol and the BTWC.

23 See K. Berry et al., *Delegitimizing Nuclear Weapons*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2010.

24 R. Johnson, T. Caughley, and J. Borrie, *Decline or Transform: Nuclear Disarmament and Security Beyond the NPT Review Process*, Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, 2012, p. 27.

25 See www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/nuclear-weapons-statement-200410.htm.

26 Ibid.

27 For further discussion see J. Borrie and T. Caughley, "How are humanitarian approaches relevant to achieving progress on nuclear disarmament?", in R. Johnson, T. Caughley, and J. Borrie, *Decline or Transform: Nuclear Disarmament and Security Beyond the NPT Review Process*, Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, 2012, p. 37.

28 See www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2011/nuclear-interview-2011-12-21.htm.

Reference must also be made to the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legality of the Use by a State of Nuclear Weapons in Armed Conflict. The Court's opinion acknowledged that there was no definitive legal consensus declaring nuclear weapons contrary to international humanitarian law in *all* circumstances. The Court explained that the principles of international humanitarian law protecting civilians and combatants are "fundamental" and "intransgressible", and that "methods and means of warfare, which would preclude any distinction between civilian and military targets, or which would result in unnecessary suffering to combatants, are prohibited".[29]

Noting the unique characteristics of nuclear weapons, the Court found that "the use of such weapons in fact seems scarcely reconcilable with respect for such requirements". But the Court went no further than to state that threat or use of nuclear weapons would be "generally contrary" to international law. The Court was uncertain as to whether using nuclear weapons in extreme cases of self-defence would be unlawful. Nonetheless, the 2010 Review Conference's statement on humanitarian consequences and international humanitarian law reinforces the moral unacceptability and presumptive unlawfulness of any use of nuclear weapons.[30]

Mention was made earlier in this paper of the humanitarian considerations that were central to the bans on anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. In the Ottawa and Oslo processes, the acceptability of each of these weapons was questioned in view of their documented effects on civilians across a range of operational contexts, and the case successfully made for new law.[31] In the context of anti-personnel mines, these weapons became widely seen as unacceptable due to effects that are inherently indiscriminate (they are victim activated) and of a nature to cause superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering to combatants. It is interesting in the context of cluster munitions that this claim was not made. Rather it was argued that the pattern of civilian harm caused by the use of cluster munitions showed these area weapons are highly prone to be indiscriminate in effect because of difficulty in targeting them so as to avoid civilians, and because of the hazards to civilians of large numbers of failed explosive submunitions.

Humanitarian considerations of acceptability thus came to diminish the utility of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions in the eyes of many states and others. In 2008, for instance, a letter published in *The Times* on cluster munitions contained the following statement: "If we are to be accepted as legitimate users of force then we must demonstrate our determination to employ that force only in the most responsible and accountable way".[32] The authors, former British and NATO military commanders, were making the point that the achievement of any political purpose by the use of force might be compromised where the loss of civilian lives provoked strong national and international reaction and opposition. It strongly implies that a weapon seen as unacceptable in its

29 International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, advisory opinion, 8 July 1996, paras. 79, 95.

30 See J. Burroughs, " Humanitarian consequences, humanitarian law: an advance in banning use of nuclear weapons", *NPT News in Review*, no. 21, 1 June 2010, www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/NIR2010/No21.pdf.

31 See G. Nystuen, "A new treaty banning cluster munitions: the interplay between disarmament diplomacy and humanitarian requirements", in C.M. Bailliet (ed.), *Security: A Multidisciplinary Normative Approach*, 2009, pp. 138–142.

32 H. Beach et al., "Cluster bombs don't work and must be banned", *The Times*, 19 May 2008.

effects is not a legitimate or a useful one. This point is highly relevant to the contemporary nuclear weapons discourse.

Conclusion

The growth of discourse on humanitarian consequences coincides with increased scepticism—even among militaries—about the utility of nuclear weapons in the face of today's security challenges. In August 2012, the United Nations Secretary-General observed:

> Many defence establishments now recognize that security means far more than protecting borders. Grave security concerns can arise as a result of demographic trends, chronic poverty, economic inequality, environmental degradation, pandemic diseases, organized crime, repressive governance and other developments no state can control alone. Arms can't address such concerns. Yet there has been a troubling lag between recognizing these new security challenges, and launching new policies to address them. National budget priorities still tend to reflect the old paradigms. Massive military spending and new investments in modernizing nuclear weapons have left the world over-armed—and peace under-funded.[33]

Meanwhile, there is considerable frustration at the conspicuous absence of progress towards nuclear disarmament in multilateral forums, and at the difficulties they face in influencing the nuclear-weapon-possessing states. This helps to explain the emergence of new government-sponsored initiatives by small and middle-sized states like those mentioned earlier. Some social movement organizations have mobilized themselves round the simplicity of the message about the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and hope this will find greater resonance with the public as well as governments directly.

Concerns about the humanitarian consequences of a nuclear weapon detonation will be explored in March 2013 at a two-day international conference to be hosted in Oslo by the Government of Norway. Announcing this initiative in the Norwegian Parliament on 17 April 2012, then-Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre framed this in the context of Norway's efforts along several tracks to contribute to reaching the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons—an approach his successor, Espen Barth Eide, has reaffirmed.[34] Mr. Støre emphasized the need to create a political basis to make it possible ultimately to achieve a nuclear-weapons-free world, including by engaging international public opinion in order to mobilize governments.[35] The time, he believed, had come for a broad discussion and assessment of the humanitarian consequences of using nuclear weapons. The March 2013 conference will be a prime opportunity to explore such consequences in greater depth.

33 See www.un.org/disarmament/update/20120830.

34 Other Norwegian-sponsored efforts include investigating the practical tasks involved in verifying reductions in nuclear warheads, and support for OEWG talks on nuclear disarmament in Geneva in 2013 mandated by the General Assembly.

35 See www.regjeringen.no/nn/dep/ud/Aktuelt/Taler-og-artiklar/jgs_taler_artikler/2012/svar_atomvapen.html?id=678795 (in Norwegian).

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About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)—an autonomous institute within the United Nations—conducts research on disarmament and security. UNIDIR is based in Geneva, Switzerland, the centre for bilateral and multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation negotiations, and home of the Conference on Disarmament. The Institute explores current issues pertaining to the variety of existing and future armaments, as well as global diplomacy and local tensions and conflicts. Working with researchers, diplomats, government officials, NGOs and other institutions since 1980, UNIDIR acts as a bridge between the research community and governments. UNIDIR's activities are funded by contributions from governments and donor foundations.