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There has been a fundamental change in the debate about nuclear weapons. After decades of focusing on nuclear weapons primarily in technical-military terms and as symbols of power, States have finally engaged in a long overdue discussion of what they would mean for people and the environment, indeed for humanity. Intergovernmental meetings over the past two years have come face to face with the catastrophic consequences that the use of these weapons had on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on the suffering they continue to inflict on survivors and their children, and the absence, nearly 70 years later, of any adequate international capacity to assist victims of nuclear detonations. They have also highlighted the enduring human costs of nuclear testing. New scientific evidence has been put before us on the impact that even limited use of nuclear weapons would have on global temperatures, food production, public health, and the world economy. In light of what has been learned, it is now difficult to deny that the impact of nuclear weapon use would be catastrophic, long lasting and unacceptable in humanitarian terms.

For the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the testimony we have heard in recent years has renewed the memory of the unspeakable suffering that we witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and of our efforts, together with the Japanese Red Cross, to aid those injured by the heat, blast and radiological effects of the atomic bombs dropped on those cities. At the time we could not have imagined that Japanese Red Cross hospitals would still be treating victims of cancer and leukemia attributable to radiation from the atomic blasts – today, 70 years after the use of these weapons.

The information presented at these meetings has increased the ICRC’s concern about the challenges facing humanitarian organizations whose duty it would be to assist the victims of nuclear weapons. As I stated last year, the ICRC has concluded that an effective means of assisting a substantial portion of survivors in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear detonation, while adequately protecting those delivering assistance, is not available and not feasible at the international level. A more recent study focusing on the capacity of UN agencies has confirmed our conclusions and reinforced our concern about the use of a weapon for which there is no adequate international humanitarian response capacity.

The global and long-term humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, which we have heard about at the Oslo and Nayarit meetings, raise profound questions about the limits of warfare and the capacity of the human species to prevent foreseeable catastrophic events. The most universally accepted limits are contained in international humanitarian law. In the view of the ICRC, the information presented over the past 2 years has significant implications for the assessment of nuclear weapons under fundamental rules of international humanitarian law and other fields of international law. Because much of the scientific information on the human costs and environmental impacts, and on the absence of adequate assistance capacities was not previously available, this information should trigger a reassessment of these weapons by States in both legal and policy terms.

It has been nearly seven decades since the world witnessed the detonation of a nuclear weapon in a populated area. Yet we have been reminded that each day we face a very real risk that such an event will occur. Accidents, malfunctions, mishaps, false alarms and misinterpreted information have nearly led to the detonation of nuclear weapons on numerous occasions since 1945. Given that the destructive capacity of many nuclear weapons is far greater than those used in 1945, the consequences in humanitarian terms would likely be even more far-reaching and long lasting. It is also disturbing that an estimated 1800 nuclear warheads remain on “high alert” status; ready to be launched within minutes.
The fact that nuclear weapons have not been used in an armed conflict since 1945 provides little assurance that the world will not witness their horrific consequences once again.

Many steps have already been taken to reduce the dangers posed by nuclear weapons. There has been a significant reduction in the number of warheads possessed by nuclear-armed States with the largest stockpiles since the end of the Cold War. Steps have also been taken to increase nuclear security and nuclear weapon free zones have been established in many parts of the world. However, indications that the pace of reductions has slowed significantly in recent years and that arsenals are being modernised are issues of serious concern.

Far more needs to be done to ensure that neither humanity as a whole nor any country, people or future generation will again suffer the consequences of nuclear weapons, whether through intentional use, accidental detonation or the effects of nuclear testing. 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 based existing commitments and international obligations. What we have learned in the past three years has further strengthened our resolve to pursue these goals.

Achieving these goals will also require concerted action by governments. All nuclear-armed States must fulfil their existing international commitments to nuclear disarmament. We are well aware that this is not an easy task, particularly in light of the current international security challenges and the lack of trust amongst powers. It is thus a responsibility of all States to help create conditions under which nuclear disarmament becomes possible.

At the same time, there is a broad sense of urgency to act: The catastrophic humanitarian consequences that we are now well aware of are too serious to ignore. If we fail to prevent these, current challenges may pale in comparison. In the short-term, more must be done to fulfil commitments to diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in military plans, doctrines and policies and to reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems. There must also be urgent action to reduce the risk of accidental use of nuclear weapons. It is also imperative that the nearly 70 year history of non-use of nuclear weapons be continued indefinitely. In our view, the only way to ensure this is to enshrine the non-use and complete elimination of nuclear weapons in a legally binding international agreement.

Nuclear weapons are often viewed as a tool of 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 as never before that the risks are high, the dangers real. It is time for States, and all those in a position to influence them, to seize with urgency and determination the unique opportunity at hand to bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end.