



Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

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On 8-9 December interested parties will convene in Vienna for the [Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons](#). This will be the third conference on this issue in two years and is the result of an increasing focus by the non-nuclear weapon states on a previously little-debated aspect of the nuclear weapons debate: the humanitarian consequences of their use.

Many commentators have argued that the momentum that has been afforded to this issue has been the result of a growing frustration felt by many of the non-nuclear weapon states at the lack of progress by the nuclear-armed states in meeting their disarmament obligations.

This note looks briefly at the outcomes of the previous conferences in Norway and Mexico, at the agenda for the forthcoming conference in Vienna and finally, at the British Government's position on attendance at that conference.

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1 Background

There has been a growing focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons by many non-nuclear states, the UN, NGOs and civil society stakeholders in recent years, largely as a result of frustration at the lack of progress in the broader disarmament agenda. The 2010 NPT Review Conference final document noted this concern:

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

Sixteen countries subsequently delivered a [joint statement](#) to the 2012 NPT Preparatory Committee² on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament and called for all states to “intensify their efforts to outlaw nuclear weapons and achieve a world free of nuclear weapons”. Those sentiments were echoed in a [further statement](#) from 35 countries to the meeting of the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament in October 2012. By the time of the 2013 meeting, 125 countries had put their names to a [Joint Statement](#).³ Specifically that statement noted that while the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons have been reflected in numerous UN resolutions and multilateral instruments, including the NPT, the “humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons have not been at the core of nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation deliberations for many years”.

As part of efforts to highlight the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, a series of conferences have also been organised. The first conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons was held in Oslo in March 2013 and was attended by 127 states, several UN agencies and a number of NGOs. A second, follow-up conference was held in Mexico in February 2014. A third conference will be held in Austria in December 2014.

¹ [NPT/CONF.2010/50 \(Vol. I\)](#)

² This was the first of three Preparatory Committees held in advance of the 2015 NPT Review Conference

³ At the 2013 NPT Preparatory Committee Session 80 countries had signed the statement.

2 Oslo Conference – March 2013

The Oslo conference in March 2013 was considered historic in that it brought together, for the first time, stakeholders from 127 states, UN agencies, international organisations and broader civil society to facilitate an informed discussion on one specific element of the nuclear weapons debate: the potential humanitarian impact of their use. Only two nuclear states attended the meeting: India and Pakistan. The five recognised nuclear weapon states, along with North Korea and Israel did not participate. The P5 nations boycotted the meeting, arguing that the conference would “divert discussion and focus” away from other disarmament fora, notably the Conference on Disarmament.⁴ It has also been reported that officials were concerned that the conferences were intended to lead towards talks on a convention on the elimination of nuclear weapons.⁵

Under discussion at the Oslo conference were preparedness and first line response, as well as the medium and long term humanitarian, health, environmental, economic and developmental effects. The key points that emerged from the meeting were summed up by the Chairman, Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide, in his closing summary:

- 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 historical experience from the use and testing of nuclear weapons has demonstrated their devastating immediate and long-term effects. While political circumstances have changed, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons remains. .
- The effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, irrespective of cause, will not be constrained by national borders, and will affect states and people in significant ways, regionally as well as globally.

As such it was recognised that an understanding of the global humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use should be the starting point for action to eliminate and ban nuclear weapons. This was considered to represent a shift in perspective among many non-nuclear weapon states increasingly frustrated with the existing architecture for disarmament negotiations, which is regarded as having achieved little in the last 10-15 years.

In his closing remarks Mr Barth Eide suggested that “this broad participation [in the conference] reflects the increasing global concern regarding the effects of nuclear weapons detonations, as well as the recognition that this is an issue of fundamental significance for us all”.⁶

During the conference a number of states expressed an interest in both continuing discussions on this issue and in broadening its discourse. An offer from Mexico to hold a

⁴ Although not formally a UN organisation, the Conference on Disarmament is mandated and financed by the UN, its terms of reference include practically all issues related to multilateral arms control and disarmament and it reports to the UN General Assembly annually. Further information on the Conference on Disarmament is available in Library briefing: SN1404, Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction

⁵ “Mexico hosts meeting on nuclear effects”, *Arms Control Today*, March 2014. Proposals for a global convention on nuclear weapons have been on the table since the mid-1990s but have consistently stalled within the Conference on Disarmament. Further detail is available in Library research paper RP10/42, [Progress towards nuclear disarmament?](#), June 2010

⁶ http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/ud/selected-topics/humanitarian-efforts/humimpact_2013.html?id=708603

follow-up conference in early 2014 was subsequently met with approval. As the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons acknowledged:

This conference has shown that any use of nuclear armaments would cause mass suffering, with calculations of climate disruption and famine in non-nuclear as well as nuclear-armed countries. This global impact makes it the responsibility – and right – of everyone to take action to stop this from happening. The P5 have missed an opportunity for dialogue here, but it has not stopped countries moving forward. On the contrary, Mexico's welcome decision to host a further meeting on this issue recognises that the nuclear weapon free countries have an important role to play.⁷

A Conference Report by the NGO, Reaching Critical Will, also concluded:

In the end, the conference was important not only because it provided the space needed to reframe the discourse around nuclear weapons, but also because it was a significant first move towards negotiations of a treaty banning nuclear weapons.⁸

3 Mexico Conference – February 2014

A follow-up conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons was held in Mexico in February 2014. 146 states, the UN and various NGO and civil society organisations attended, including a number of survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Again, representatives from India and Pakistan attended the conference, but the five recognised nuclear weapons states, along with North Korea and Israel did not. A US State Department Spokeswoman said that the US decision not to attend the Mexican conference did not “indicate any lessening support for nuclear disarmament. We continue to take very seriously the consequences of nuclear weapons use [...] We remain committed to practical step-by-step disarmament and will continue to take steps toward securing a world without nuclear weapons”.⁹

The intention of the conference was to pick up on the discussions held in Oslo and also broaden the debate to consider further humanitarian consequences of either an intentional or accidental nuclear detonation. The agenda was subsequently far reaching and included debate on public health implications, humanitarian assistance, the economy, development and environmental issues, climate change, food security and risk management, among others. Building upon the key points of the Oslo conference, the key conclusions of the Mexico meeting were as follows:

- The effects of a nuclear weapon detonation are not constrained by national borders – it is therefore an issue of deep concern shared by all.
- Beyond the immediate death and destruction caused by a detonation, socio-economic development will be hampered and the environment will be damaged. Suffering will be widespread, the poor and vulnerable being the most severely affected.

⁷ ICAN, Media Release, 5 March 2013

⁸ Reaching Critical Will, *Conference Report: Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, March 2013

⁹ “Mexico hosts meeting on nuclear effects”, *Arms Control Today*, March 2014

- Reconstruction of infrastructure and regeneration of economic activities, trade, communications, health facilities and schools would take several decades, causing profound social and political harm.
- Radiation exposure could result in short and long-term negative effects in every organ of the human body and would increase cancer risks and future hereditary pathologies.
- Today the risk of nuclear weapons use is growing globally as a consequence of proliferation, the vulnerability of nuclear command and control networks to cyber-attacks and to human error, and potential access to nuclear weapons by non-state actors, in particular terrorist groups.
- As more countries deploy more nuclear weapons on higher levels of combat readiness, the risks of accidental, mistake, unauthorised or intentional use of these weapons grow significantly.
- It is a fact that no state or international organisation has the capacity to address or provide the short and long term humanitarian assistance and protection needed in case of nuclear weapon explosion. Moreover it would not be possible to establish such capacities, even if attempted.¹⁰

Again, the conference called for nuclear weapons to be outlawed as a first step towards elimination. The Chairman went on to state that discussions on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons together with initiatives such as the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the achievement of a comprehensive outcome at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, are mutually reinforcing processes. As such:

The broad-based and comprehensive discussions on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons should lead to the commitment of States and civil society to reach new international standards and norms, through a legally binding instrument.

It is the view of the Chair that the Nayarit Conference has shown that the time come to initiate a diplomatic process conducive to this goal. Our belief is that this process should comprise a specific timeframe, the definition of the most appropriate fora, and a clear and substantive framework, making the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons the essence of disarmament efforts.¹¹

It was acknowledged, however, that differing views existed among the delegates on how best to achieve those objectives. Australia, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands and Turkey all expressed concern that outlawing nuclear weapons as a first step was in no way a guarantee that nuclear weapons would be eliminated. They also argued that such an initiative was more likely to “antagonise the nuclear armed states than to bring them into a multilateral process”.¹²

Discussions were expected to continue at a third conference toward the end of 2014, which Austria offered to host. In addition to the topics already under discussion, the Director of Disarmament, Arms Control and Nonproliferation within the Austrian Federal Ministry for

¹⁰ Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, *Chair's Summary*, February 2014

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Reaching Critical Will, *Report from the Nayarit Conference*, March 2014

European and International Affairs also indicated that the agenda could include debate on the implications of nuclear weapons use under international law.¹³

4 Agenda for the Vienna Conference – December 2014

The *Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons* will be held on 8-9 December 2014. Recognising what has already been achieved in Norway and Mexico, the Austrian government's aim for this conference is to "strengthen the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime and to contribute to the growing momentum to firmly anchor the humanitarian imperative in all global efforts dealing with nuclear weapons and nuclear disarmament".

In line with the previous conferences in Oslo and Nayarit, the Vienna conference is expected to further discussions on the humanitarian and environmental impacts of a nuclear weapon detonation, while also extending that debate to existing international law relevant to this issue. Specifically, sessions have been earmarked for discussion on the short and long term implications of a nuclear weapons explosion, especially in the areas of health, environment, climate, food security, and infrastructure, and the potential interaction of these consequences. The impact of nuclear tests in all of these areas will be debated as will the risk factors associated with a deliberate or accidental nuclear explosion. A separate session on relevant international humanitarian law has also been scheduled.

The Austrian government has said that it does not intend for the Vienna Conference to be the start of a diplomatic process for a ban on the possession of nuclear weapons.¹⁴ It has, however, expressed the desire to pull together the key findings of the Vienna, Nayarit and Oslo meetings and present them to the NPT review conference in 2015 as a means to pushing for more concrete progress towards nuclear disarmament.¹⁵

In a *Joint Statement* to the meeting of the UN General Assembly First Committee, in October 2014, 155 countries welcomed the Vienna Conference and urged all states to participate. That statement argued that:

This work is essential, because the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons affect not only governments, but each and every citizen of our interconnected world. They have deep implications for human survival; for our environment; for socio-economic development; for our economies; and the health of future generations. For these reasons, we firmly believe that awareness of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons must underpin all approaches and efforts towards nuclear disarmament.¹⁶

A separate *statement*, presented by Australia on behalf of 20 countries, also welcomed the increasing awareness of the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and the aims of the Vienna Conference, but also went on to stress the need for "substantive and constructive engagement" with those states possessing nuclear weapons. They highlighted the importance of the NPT in this regard and urged the nuclear weapon states to meet their

¹³ "Mexico hosts meeting on nuclear effects", *Arms Control Today*, March 2014

¹⁴ "US mulls attending nuclear meeting", *Arms Control Today*, November 2014

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ UNGA 69: First Committee, *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons*, 20 October 2014

disarmament obligations under that treaty. They concluded by linking the outcomes of the Vienna Conference to “a successful outcome of the NPT Review Conference in 2015”.¹⁷

At the beginning of November the US administration announced that it would attend the Vienna Conference, in contrast to its previous stance on attendance in Oslo and Mexico. A US State Department press release noted:

Following a careful review of the agenda, as well as discussions with the conference host Austria, the United States concluded there were real prospects for constructive engagement with conference participants.

The United States fully understands the serious consequences of nuclear weapons use and gives the highest priority to avoiding their use.

The United States is committed to seeking the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. As we have said previously, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the focus of our efforts on disarmament, as well as on nonproliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. However, this conference is not the appropriate venue for disarmament negotiations or pre-negotiation discussions and the United States will not engage in efforts of that kind in Vienna.

We look forward to presenting the U.S. perspective at the Vienna Conference. This event will be a useful opportunity to highlight the significant progress the United States has made and the resources it devotes to create conditions under which nuclear weapons are never again used.¹⁸

5 UK Position on Attendance

The UK Government outlined its general position towards the Conferences in a letter to Jeremy Corbyn on 12 February 2014. This was in relation to the question of UK attendance at the Conference in Mexico in February. The full letter, from Foreign Office Minister Hugh Robertson, was laid in the Library of the House as [DEP2014-0200](#).

In that letter, Mr Robertson explained that the UK “shares the deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons, expressed by the NPT State Parties at the 2010 Review Conference”. He added, however, that after careful consideration, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had decided against attending the Mexico conference because of concerns that “some efforts under the humanitarian consequences initiative appear increasingly aimed at pursuing a Nuclear Weapons Convention prohibiting nuclear weapons outright.” He went on to state that “the UK believes the NPT should remain the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and the essential foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament and for peaceful uses of nuclear energy”. As such the best way to achieve the goal of a world without nuclear weapons is “through gradual disarmament negotiated using the NPT Step by Step process and Review cycle.”¹⁹

Mr Robertson gave a similar answer to a Parliamentary Question on 24 February 2014:

¹⁷ Australian Mission to the UN, *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons*, 20 October 2014

¹⁸ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/11/233868.htm>

¹⁹ Letter dated 12/02/2014 from Hugh Robertson MP to Jeremy Corbyn MP regarding the Second Conference on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons, to be held in Mexico 13-14 February 2014, [DEP2014-0200](#)

Mr Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason the Government did not send a delegation to the conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons that began in Mexico on 13 February 2014; for what reasons this decision was not announced until the day before the conference began; and if he will make a statement. [188254]

Hugh Robertson: The Government remain determined to continue to work with partners across the international community to control proliferation and to make progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament, to build trust and confidence between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states, and to take tangible steps toward a safer and more stable world.

The Government gave careful consideration to whether to attend the Mexico conference. However, we remain concerned that many supporters of the conference appear to have a nuclear weapons convention prohibiting nuclear weapons outright as their ultimate goal.

The United Kingdom believes that the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) should remain the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and the essential foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament and for making available the benefits from the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The UK believes that attempts to establish new conferences or bodies to discuss such approaches risk undermining the full implementation of all three pillars of the non-proliferation treaty.²⁰

More succinctly, Mr Robertson responded to Sandra Osborne's question about the UK not attending the Mexico Conference by saying "because we believe that there are other international forums that are more effective for achieving those aims."²¹

At the time of writing, 79 Members had signed an EDM sponsored by Jeremy Corbyn urging the UK Government to attend the Conference in Austria.²² 34 Members also signed an EDM, sponsored by Nick Harvey, which called on the government to participate in the Vienna Conference, particularly in light of the US administration's change of position on attending the conference.²³

On 2 December 2014 the Foreign Secretary subsequently confirmed during FCO questions that "We have decided to accept Austria's invitation to attend the Vienna conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons on 8 and 9 December. We will be represented by Mrs Susan le Jeune, the UK ambassador to Austria and permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency".²⁴ The decision by the British government to attend has been welcomed by disarmament advocates.

6 Suggested Reading and Resources

- ["Humanitarian Campaign's Challenge to Nuclear Weapon States"](#), *Strategic Comments*, October 2014
- ["The humanitarian consequences of nuclear war"](#), *Arms Control Today*, November 2013

²⁰ HC Deb 24 February 2014 c57W

²¹ HC Deb 4 March 2014 c755

²² EDM 39, Session 2014-15

²³ EDM 505, Session 2014-15

²⁴ HC Deb 2 December 2014, c156

- Reaching Critical Will, *Unspeakable Suffering: the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, February 2013
- [Official Website of the Vienna Conference](#), December 2014
- [Official Website of the Mexico Conference](#), February 2014
- [Official Website of the Norway Conference](#), March 2013