

Banning nuclear weapons, 122 governments take leadership where nuclear powers have failed



ICAN campaigners in New York's Central Park during a break in the nuclear ban negotiations at the United Nations. Photo: ICAN

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Nuclear weapons have always been seen as deeply immoral. Now, after years of work, 122 government have adopted a treaty that makes them completely illegal. The July 7th decision at the United Nations ban the manufacture, possession and use of nuclear weapons and provides pathways for their eventual elimination. World Council of Churches' members are among the many groups and governments working towards this new international law for the past six years and more.

"I welcome this treaty with great thanksgiving. It is designed to protect all countries and the planet that is our home. It could ultimately save millions of lives," said the WCC general secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit. "The WCC called for this very treaty at its Assembly in South Korea in 2013. We vowed there to live in ways that protect life and creation, not in fear, protected by nuclear weapons."

The new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons recognises that “the catastrophic consequences” of nuclear weapons “cannot be adequately addressed, transcend national boundaries, pose grave implications for human survival” and are the responsibility of all states.

The nine countries with nuclear weapons and 30 countries that seek shelter in U.S. nuclear deterrence boycotted the month-long treaty negotiations and largely opposed years of preparatory work.

“The treaty, and the process which led to it, has finally taken the international debate over nuclear weapons beyond the narrow self-serving perspectives of military strategy and political influence to the wider domain of humanitarian principle and fundamental ethics, where the moral imperative against nuclear weapons is clear and categorical,” said WCC International Affairs Director Peter Prove.

The nuclear ban treaty requires that states provide assistance to victims of nuclear weapons use and testing, and requires environmental remediation for areas contaminated by radiation.

“This historic achievement acknowledges the unconscionable suffering of those affected by nuclear weapons use and testing. The treaty sets a course to ensure that nuclear weapons will never be used under any circumstances,” said Dr Emily Welty, Vice moderator of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. “It has been an honour for World Council of Churches to accompany the process and to highlight the voices of the hibakusha and indigenous groups who cry out for justice.”

Welty, other members of the CCIA and members of the Ecumenical Peace Advocacy Network of the WCC have advocated for the negotiations and for specific human-centered provisions in the treaty, of which there are many.

The treaty calls special attention, for example, to the “disproportionate impact” of ionizing radiation on women and girls, based on long-neglected evidence gathered in the Marshall Islands and other territories used for nuclear tests.

“This treaty is anticipated to have an impact on all states, whether they join immediately or not, by stigmatising nuclear weapons and making the continued maintenance, development, and possession of nuclear weapons unacceptable,” the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons declared. ICAN is playing a key role in the ban process. It has over 400 partner organizations including the WCC.

The treaty puts nuclear weapons in the same category as other indiscriminate, inhumane weapons such as chemical weapons and biological weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. It ends a peculiar exception—that the worst weapon of mass destruction, is the only weapon of mass destruction not expressly prohibited. It therefore fills a gap in the law created and sustained by the ways in which nuclear powers have used their international power and influence.

“Recent events that have seen North Korea testing such weapons of mass destruction have for me starkly brought our campaign and advocacy against these weapons into sharp focus,” said CCIA commissioner Masimba Kuchera of Zimbabwe, who was in New York to lobby for a strong treaty. “Even those who have stockpiled nuclear weapons are afraid that someone may pull the trigger first. Having no country own these weapons is the best insurance that no one from a country big or small will ever have to fear such irreversible destruction. Christianity and indeed all faiths are premised on loving one another”.

“Churches now have a fine opportunity to help with the next step,” the WCC general secretary said. “We can all urge our governments to sign and ratify the treaty and then to see that it is implemented.

WCC Report from the UN in New York: Treaty to ban nuclear weapons nearing completion (4 July, 2017)