

The Humanitarian Initiative on nuclear weapons: A briefing for UK parliamentarians

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This briefing paper highlights the growing urgency and importance of the humanitarian imperative to prohibit nuclear weapons through a new legal instrument. It is vital that politicians in the UK are aware of this international

"A global ban on nuclear weapons would present the greatest challenge to UK renewal of Trident."

Dame Joan Ruddock, former Labour MP and Minister for Energy

context when making decisions about the renewal of Trident. Even assuming that it does not initially sign up to a new treaty comprehensively banning nuclear weapons, for which global support is growing, the UK is subject to the pressures of a changing legal and political environment and could find its present position increasingly untenable.

Reframing the debate: the Humanitarian Initiative on nuclear weapons

There has been a fundamental shift in the international discourse on nuclear disarmament over the past six years, based on new evidence of the catastrophic humanitarian impacts that any nuclear weapon detonation would bring, and an acknowledgement of the increasing risk of use of nuclear weapons.

The humanitarian and environmental impact of UK nuclear weapons

Research from Scientists for Global Responsibility shows that if used, the nuclear weapons carried by just one British Trident submarine could directly cause more than 10 million civilian casualties. With more firepower than all the weapons fired in WW2, this would trigger such huge climatic disruption that global food supplies would be at risk and the survival of human civilisation itself would be threatened.

"The UK government keeps saying the rest of the world is okay with us having nuclear weapons – but the Humanitarian Initiative shows this isn't true."

Sir Nick Harvey, former Liberal Democrat MP and Minister for the Armed Forces

The Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, held in December 2014, concluded with a pledge from the Austrian government to work with others to fill the unacceptable "legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons". The United Nations General Assembly has since adopted this Pledge in the form of Resolution 70/48 with 139 countries voting in favour, and a new UN-mandated working group met in February 2016 to advance this goal. The UK was in a small minority of countries which voted *against* the Resolution and has refused to participate in these multilateral nuclear disarmament talks. A clear majority of the world's governments are ready to move forward with the prohibition of nuclear weapons as an urgent humanitarian necessity, even if nuclear weapon states such as the UK are not ready to participate.

Making nuclear weapons illegal



While more than 40,000 nuclear weapons have been dismantled since the peak of the Cold War, current efforts at disarmament are clearly insufficient, leaving more than 16,000 nuclear warheads still active. Nuclear weapons are the only weapon of mass destruction not yet prohibited by international treaty. Prohibiting nuclear weapons through a legally-binding international treaty is a practical, feasible, and effective way to help facilitate nuclear disarmament in the current context. A ban treaty can be achieved now, even without the nuclear-armed states. It would stigmatize nuclear weapons and set clear new standards.

Legal obligations

The UK and other nuclear-armed states have long expressed their desire for a nuclear weapon-free world. Alongside other nuclear-armed states, the UK has a legal obligation under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue 'effective measures' towards nuclear disarmament.

Political pressure

With the final decision over the renewal of Trident due to be taken in 2016, the decision over the renewal of the UK's nuclear weapons will be taken at the same time that other states are engaged in multilateral disarmament talks that will rule those weapons illegal. This development will significantly increase the political costs of holding onto nuclear weapons and sinking even more money in their maintenance and modernisation.

"It is high time the Government stated their support for a new legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons that would complement our disarmament commitment under Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty"

Angus Robertson, SNP MP

Military cooperation: NATO

There is no barrier to NATO member states' adherence to a treaty banning nuclear weapons. All NATO states are members of the NPT and as such are committed to pursue 'effective measures' towards disarmament. According to its Strategic Concept, NATO aims to "create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons". Virtually all NATO states have taken part in one or more of the conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and the humanitarian initiative was spearheaded by a NATO state – Norway. NATO states should see the value of a ban on nuclear weapons for promoting NATO's ultimate aim: the security of its member states.

Finance and investment

According to a 2015 report 'Don't Bank on the Bomb' by Dutch NGO PAX, 26 financial institutions in the UK made an estimated £21.1 billion available to 26 nuclear weapons producing companies since January 2012. The report shows that the stigmatizing effect of this international divestment campaign is already resulting in a huge increase in financial institutions divesting from nuclear weapons producers, as well as a gradual drop in institutions still investing in them. The stigma on these WMDs is growing in the financial world and beyond. A treaty signed by a majority of countries in the world that prohibits investment in the development, production, or testing of nuclear weapons would significantly increase pressure for many UK financial institutions to pull out their investments from companies that develop them. Past experience with the treaty that bans cluster munitions shows that the stigmatizing effect of outlawing weapons significantly reduces available financing for their production.

Key points:

- A clear majority of countries adopted a Resolution at the United Nations General Assembly in December 2015 to convene talks in Geneva in 2016 to develop new law on nuclear weapons. The UK was in a small minority of countries voting against these multilateral nuclear disarmament talks, and has since refused to participate.
- Nuclear weapons are the only weapons of mass destruction not yet outlawed; we must urgently address this legal anomaly.
- Humanitarian and environmental concerns must inform the debate on Trident renewal.
- A ban treaty can be negotiated with or without the participation of nuclear armed states.
- The political and practical impacts of a global ban treaty on the UK's possession of nuclear weapons must not be ignored by parliamentarians, particularly in debating Trident renewal.

"A new international ban treaty would strip UK nuclear weapons of their veneer of legitimacy and substantially diminish the domestic political values assigned to these weapons."

Nick Ritchie, University of York

ICAN UK is a coalition of UK NGOs campaigning for a new treaty banning nuclear weapons.

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