



ICRC

**Eliminating Nuclear Weapons:
a Humanitarian Imperative**

**Statement
to the
19th World Congress
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War
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Address by Mrs Christine Beerli, Vice-President ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War share some very fundamental perspectives on war and weapons. The IPPNW, as a non-partisan federation of doctors and health workers, approaches nuclear and other weapons primarily from a public health perspective. The ICRC's purely humanitarian mission as a neutral and independent organisation is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence. We seek to provide these victims the assistance, medical and otherwise, that they need to survive and rebuild their lives. We also work to prevent suffering in armed conflict by promoting respect for international humanitarian law including the Geneva Conventions and their additional Protocols. The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with whom we work throughout the world are also often key components of national health systems. Because of our role on the front lines of armed conflict and other situations of violence we bear a responsibility not only to assist but, where possible, to prevent human suffering.

As the first senior ICRC official to address an IPPNW World Congress I would like to commend the IPPNW for its pioneering role since 1980 in calling attention to the catastrophic health and environmental consequences of nuclear war. These efforts were rightly recognised in the organisation being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. It is also a sign of the organisation's solid public health orientation that you have also evolved to address other types of weapons, including the small arms and light weapons that have inflicted most of the civilian suffering in warfare in past decades. The use of weapons is, and must continue to be, a public health issue. Indeed, one can think of no commercial product other than weapons that has no other effect on people than to damage their health. In taking the health perspective further we must recognise that weapons, like drugs, have a variety of legitimate purposes. But in the wrong hands and when they are not used according to accepted norms they can have devastating consequences. It is therefore interesting to note that virtually every State in the world regulates the medical profession as well as access to and use of legitimate drugs. If the same were true of weapons, much of the civilian suffering we witness in our work each day might well be avoided. Because of their profound implications for health, indeed because of their association with life and death decisions, the ICRC believes that access to weapons of war should be limited to those who will use them in accordance with the rules of international humanitarian law. Those with access to such weapons must understand and apply the rules of international humanitarian law and be punished when they violate these rules.

In linking these broader issues to the issue of nuclear weapons I am inspired to quote from the IPPNW's own self-description. You collectively "recognize that the catastrophic health and environmental consequences of a nuclear war are at the extreme end of a continuum of armed violence that undermines health and security". The International Committee of the Red Cross likewise believes that the debate about nuclear weapons must be conducted not only on the basis of military doctrines and power politics but also on the basis of public health and human security. The existence of nuclear weapons poses some of the most profound questions about the point at which the rights of States must yield to the interests of humanity, the capacity of our species to master the technology it creates, the reach of international humanitarian law, and the extent of human suffering that people are willing to inflict, or to permit, in warfare.

As the ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger stated in his address on nuclear weapons to the Geneva diplomatic corps this past April "the currency of this debate must ultimately be about human beings, about the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law, and about the collective future of humanity".

The ICRC brings to the debate its own direct testimony to the consequences of the use nuclear weapons and their potential to render impossible the mission of humanitarian assistance that this organization exists to fulfil. Dr Marcel Junod, an ICRC delegate, was the first foreign doctor in Hiroshima to assess the effects of the atomic bombing and to assist its victims. His testimony in an article entitled "The Hiroshima disaster", first published in 1982, told of the human reality of this weapon.

"We (...) witnessed a sight totally unlike anything we had ever seen before. The centre of the city was a sort of white patch, flattened and smooth like the palm of a hand. Nothing remained. The slightest trace of houses seemed to have disappeared. The white patch was about two kilometres in diameter. Around its edge was a red belt, marking the area where houses had burned, extending quite a long way further (...) covering almost all the rest of the city."

According to witnesses encountered by Junod, in a few seconds after the blast *"thousands of human beings in the streets and gardens in the town centre, struck by a wave of intense heat, died like flies. Others lay writhing like worms, atrociously burned. All private houses, warehouses, etc., disappeared as if swept away by a supernatural power. Trams were picked up and hurled yards away, as if they were weightless; trains were flung off the rails (...). Every living thing was petrified in an attitude of acute pain"*.

As Junod recounted, destruction of this magnitude does not spare medical infrastructure or doctors and their materials. Of 300 doctors in Hiroshima 270 were reported dead, of 1,780 nurses 1,654 were dead, of 140 pharmacists 112 were dead. Miraculously, the Japanese Red Cross hospital that Junod visited remained largely intact. However, it could no longer function as its laboratory equipment was unusable, a third of its staff had been killed and there was no possibility of blood transfusion as the donors were either dead or had disappeared. Of a thousand patients who had taken refuge there on the first day, 600 rapidly died. In an emergency hospital Junod visited patients were suffering from the delayed effects of radioactivity. To use his words, *"They need small blood transfusions at regular intervals; but there are no donors, no doctors to determine the compatibility of the blood groups; consequently, there is no treatment"*.

The suffering caused by the use of nuclear weapons is increased exponentially by the devastation of emergency and medical assistance infrastructure. In addition, as this audience knows well, the effects on human beings of the radiation generated by a nuclear blast will cause suffering and death for years after the initial explosion. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fatalities increased **two- to three-fold** over the following five years.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been preoccupied by nuclear weapons since the dawn of the nuclear age. Already on 5 September 1945 the ICRC publicly called for a ban on nuclear weapons. In a communication to States party to the Geneva Conventions in 1950, the ICRC stated that before the atomic age:

"[W]ar still presupposed certain restrictive rules; above all (...) it presuppose[d] discrimination between combatants and non-combatants. With atomic bombs and non-directed missiles, discrimination became impossible. Such arms will not spare hospitals, prisoner of war camps and civilians. Their inevitable consequence is extermination, pure and simple.... [Their] effects, immediate and lasting, prevent access to the wounded and their treatment. In these conditions, the mere assumption that atomic weapons may be used, for whatever reason, is enough to make illusory any attempt to protect non-combatants by legal texts. Law, written or unwritten, is powerless when confronted with the total destruction the use of this arm implies". On this basis the International Committee called on States to take *"all steps to reach an agreement on the prohibition of atomic weapons"*.

In 1996 the ICRC welcomed the fact that the International Court of Justice, in its Advisory Opinion on nuclear weapons, confirmed that the principles of distinction and proportionality found in international humanitarian law are "intransgressible" and apply also to nuclear weapons. In applying those principles to nuclear weapons the Court concluded that "the use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the principles and rules of international humanitarian law". It was unable to decide whether, even in the extreme circumstance of a threat to the very survival of the State, the use of nuclear weapons would be legitimate.

The Court also found that "...The destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be contained in either space or time (...). The radiation released by a nuclear explosion would affect health, agriculture, natural resources and demography over a very wide area. Further, the use of nuclear weapons would be a serious danger to future generations..." In the light of this finding, the ICRC finds it difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law.

The position of the ICRC, as a humanitarian organization, goes – and must go – beyond a purely legal analysis. Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power, in the unspeakable human suffering they cause, in the impossibility of controlling their effects in space and time, in the risks of escalation they create, and in the threat they pose to the environment, to future generations, and indeed to the survival of humanity. It was for this reason that the ICRC President appealed four months ago to all States to ensure that such weapons are never used again, regardless of their views on the legality of such use.

In the view of the ICRC, preventing the use of nuclear weapons requires fulfilment of existing obligations to pursue negotiations aimed at prohibiting and completely eliminating such weapons through a legally binding international treaty. It also means preventing their proliferation and controlling access to materials and technology that can be used to produce them.

The international community now has at hand a unique opportunity to reduce and eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons. It is significant and encouraging that all States Parties at the recent NPT Review Conference recognised for the first time the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons" and, in this regard, the relevance of international humanitarian law. The endorsement of the objective of "a world without nuclear weapons" by both the UN Security Council summit in September 2009 and the NPT Review Conference this May has also helped to legitimise the view that these weapons must never again be used and therefore must be eliminated. As UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon stated in Hiroshima three weeks ago it is time to take concrete steps on the "journey from ground-zero to Global Zero". The ICRC is committed to making its contribution to these efforts.

Returning to my earlier remarks on the ICRC's health-oriented approach to weapons, I would also like to highlight the urgency of dramatically reinforcing national and international control of access to all types of conventional weapons and ammunition. The effects of inadequate control of access to small arms and light weapons effectively renders them what have been called "weapons of mass destruction in slow motion". It is the victims of these weapons, who are all too often victims of violations of international humanitarian law committed with such weapons, that the ICRC tries daily to protect and assist. But the challenges are insurmountable when access to conventional arms and ammunition is virtually unrestrained. Here too we have opportunities for substantial progress through increased responsibility in national arms transfer policies and efforts currently under way to develop an global Arms Trade Treaty to be adopted in 2012. Such a treaty must include provisions to prevent transfer of arms and ammunition to recipients which are likely to use them to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law.

The steady development in the past 15 years of international humanitarian law prohibitions and restrictions on the use of a range of weapons, including anti-personnel mines, blinding laser weapons and cluster munitions, demonstrates that humanity is not powerless to act in the face of the proliferation or use of weapons that have unacceptable human costs. Indeed, communicating about the human costs of warfare and the unacceptability of preventable suffering has been at the heart of the mission of the Red Cross since its founding by Henry Dunant in 1863. Health professionals, represented here by members of the IPPNW, and the worldwide international Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent are in a privileged position to understand and communicate about these human costs on a credible and impartial basis. If we do so effectively we can, together, prevent incredible human suffering. This important Congress can and must make a real contribution to this end.