

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, FIRST COMMITTEE ON DISARMAMENT AND
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY



Human Rights, Nuclear Weapons, and the Environment

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Mr. Chairperson and distinguished delegates:

Nuclear weapons and climate change are two of the most pressing issues of our time. It is imperative that we address these threats simultaneously and with fortitude. We have moral, political, and legal responsibilities to protect human rights, protect our environment, promote sustainable development, and ensure that we leave behind a decent and livable global society for future generations.

Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy maintains that honoring these responsibilities presupposes a strong commitment to human rights. Not only do nuclear weapons endanger the non-negotiable right to life, but they also endanger the rights to health, housing, development, food and the right to be free from discrimination, to name just a few.

In 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Committee produced General Comment No. 36, clearly delineating the human rights implications from the continued existence of nuclear weapons. The Committee said that “the threat or use of weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear weapons, ... is incompatible with respect for the right to life and may amount to a crime under international law.” In an LCNP publication released early this year, [Human Rights Versus Nuclear Weapons: New Dimensions](#), contributors delve into the Committee’s findings and related matters.

Also not to be forgotten is that nuclear weapons development, modernization, testing, and waste disposal disproportionately affect people in poor and minority communities. The nuclear weapons regime has from the start been entangled with colonialism, racism and patriarchy.

In the same 2018 comment, the Human Rights Committee observed that “environmental degradation, climate change and unsustainable development constitute some of the most pressing and serious threats to the ability of present and future generations to enjoy the right to life.” Importantly, environmental degradation and climate change increase the possibility of political instability and conflict, and therefore possible resort to nuclear arms. For this reason alone, states must actively work towards both environmental protection and disarmament.

We must change the narrative that nuclear weapons are a symbol of sovereignty, bring security, and promote stability and peace. In reality, we are living in a very insecure, unstable environment, above all due to actual and potential disruptions by nuclear weapons and climate change. A human rights approach can help change the narrative.

Human rights are about the rights of individuals, not states; ultimately too they are about the well-being of societies and peoples. They deeply connect to foundational international instruments, among them the UN Charter, which begins “We the Peoples of the United Nations”, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which refers to safeguarding the “security of peoples”. Further, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons invokes human rights, and protects the rights of victims of nuclear weapons testing and use. Human rights also connect to and overlap with international humanitarian law, which, as the International Court of Justice said, is based on “elementary considerations of humanity”.

With the NPT Review Conference and the first meeting of States Parties to the TPNW lying before us, we urge states to integrate the imperatives of non-use and elimination of nuclear weapons with protection of human rights, care for the environment, the promotion of sustainable development and human security.