

Statement by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to the 77th session of the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly

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Distinguished delegates,

As this Committee meets here in New York, the world faces what is widely agreed to be the highest risk of use of nuclear weapons in decades. Russia has invaded Ukraine and threatened to use nuclear weapons against anyone intervening in the conflict. More recently, Russia threatened to use nuclear weapons to defend regions in Ukraine that it has illegally annexed. These threats have heightened tensions, reduced the threshold for use of nuclear weapons, and greatly increased the risk of global catastrophe.

The risk is heightened by responses from other governments that imply possible retaliation with nuclear weapons, as well as by commentary that analyzes scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used in the Ukraine conflict, and in many cases ignores or minimizes the consequences. These developments are normalizing the idea of using nuclear weapons and eroding the decades-old taboo against their use. As the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* commented recently, “To allow, in thoughts and words, the possibility of a nuclear conflict is a sure step towards allowing it in reality”.

Russia’s actions have revealed the true nature of nuclear deterrence: nuclear weapons being used not for maintaining security and stability, but for coercion and intimidation; for facilitating illegal aggression and killing innocent civilians. Any nuclear-armed state can employ this kind of nuclear coercion; the so-called “nuclear deterrents” possessed by other states do not deter, and provide no remedy for, nuclear threats.

As long as nuclear weapons exist, there can be no remedy: all your countries, all your people, are hostage to these weapons and to all the countries that possess them. There are no responsible nuclear-armed states, because commitments to policies based on deterrence theories are unsustainable, and the resulting expansion and modernization of nuclear weapons programs will, one day, result in use. And the humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons will be wide-ranging and catastrophic.

Thus, a nuclear threat against one state is a threat against all states. Like climate change and pandemic disease, the terrible risks posed by nuclear weapons constitute an urgent global problem and require an urgent global response. We must cease looking towards the status quo paradigms that have walked the world toward disaster as the solutions that will now prevent disaster from becoming reality. We must instead support norms and laws that point toward a saner future. In this connection, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is the only global treaty that prohibits both any use and any threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Is your government helping to perpetuate the problem, or working to solve it? In June, the first Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons adopted a declaration condemning unequivocally “any and all nuclear threats, whether they be explicit or implicit and irrespective of the circumstances”. We call upon all governments, and this Committee, to issue similarly categorical condemnations, and to respond promptly and firmly to any future threats to use nuclear weapons. Consistent and unequivocal condemnation will stigmatize and delegitimize nuclear threats, and help to restore and strengthen the norm against use.

And we must delegitimize not just use and threats to use nuclear weapons, but the weapons themselves. Delegitimizing possession of nuclear weapons, and deterrence policies that perpetuate these weapons programs, is the key to making real progress on nuclear disarmament. The repeated failure of NPT review conferences demonstrates that nuclear disarmament cannot be left only in the hands of states which consider their own possession of nuclear weapons to be legitimate. The TPNW provides a legal structure to eliminate nuclear weapons, as well as a mechanism to delegitimize them. More and more states are seeing the TPNW as the brightest hope for a future without nuclear weapons. Following treaty actions by seven states at last month’s High-level treaty ceremony, the TPNW now has 68 states parties and 91 signatories.

In the current circumstances, the single most effective action a state can take to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons being used, and to move closer to their elimination, is to join the TPNW and participate actively in its implementation. In the interest of the very survival of humanity, we urge all states to do so.