

Statement by Jackie Cabasso, Executive Director, Western States Legal Foundation,
on behalf of the Abolition 2000 Working Group on the UN Disarmament Agenda
and a Nuclear Weapons Convention

An abridged version of this statement was read during the civil society presentations to the First Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 2026 Review Conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, on 2 August 2023 in Vienna, Austria.

I am speaking on behalf of the Abolition 2000 Working Group on the UN Disarmament Agenda and a Nuclear Weapons Convention. During the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, I was a “founding mother” of the Abolition 2000 Global Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons.

Article VI of the NPT, which entered into force in 1970, states: “Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament....”¹ Five years after the end of the Cold War, there was no indication that this obligation was being taken seriously, and NGOs attending the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference from around the world drafted the Abolition 2000 Founding Statement, calling upon all states, particularly the nuclear armed states, declared and de facto, to, “Initiate immediately and conclude by the year 2000, negotiations on a nuclear weapons abolition convention that requires the phased elimination of all nuclear weapons within a timebound framework, with provisions for effective verification and enforcement.”²

The NPT’s indefinite extension was coupled with a package of Principles and Objectives affirming, “[T]he determined pursuit by the NWS of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally, with the ultimate goals of eliminating those weapons....”³

The Abolition 2000 Statement inspired the drafting of a Model Nuclear Weapons Convention by international lawyers, scientists, and activists, under the auspices of the Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and the International Peace Bureau. The Model Convention, which outlines a comprehensive framework of the legal, technical, and institutional measures to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world, was circulated to UN Member States in 1997 by the UN Secretary-General, updated in 2007 and again circulated as an official UN document.⁴

As the year 2000 approached, with no convention on the horizon, Abolition 2000 enrolled more than 2000 organizations in some 90 countries and continued its advocacy. The Abolition 2000 Founding Statement and the Model Nuclear Weapons Convention laid the groundwork for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which entered into force in 2021.⁵

More than twenty years ago, at the close of the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the nuclear-armed states committed to an “unequivocal undertaking... to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.” For the first time in the NPT’s then-30-year history they dropped qualifiers like “ultimate goal” regarding their nuclear disarmament obligation. They also agreed to “a diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons will ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination.”⁶

The Model Nuclear Weapons Convention was submitted to the 8th Review Conference of the NPT in 2010 by Costa Rica.⁷ The agreed final outcome document declared: “All States need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. The Conference notes the Five-Point Proposal for Nuclear Disarmament of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, which proposes among other things the consideration of negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments backed by a strong system of verification.”⁸

The length of the NPT extension has now surpassed the original duration of the treaty, yet the 1995, 2000, and 2010 commitments remain largely unfulfilled, and disarmament has gone into reverse. The role of nuclear weapons in the security policies of the nuclear-armed and “nuclear umbrella” states is expanding. All of the nuclear-armed states are qualitatively modernizing and upgrading their arsenals, and some are increasing the size of their stockpiles.

To address this nuclear disarmament crisis, the Abolition 2000 Working Group on the UN Disarmament Agenda and a Nuclear Weapons Convention prepared our original working paper, “Abolition 2000 NWC Reset: Frameworks for a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World,” outlining frameworks for disarmament for last year’s 10th NPT Review Conference. Our intention was then and is now to underline the urgent need for attention to the control and elimination of nuclear arsenals and how that might be achieved, no matter how difficult near-term progress might appear. We also hoped to encourage people and governments to consider the strengths and weaknesses of a range of approaches to disarmament. Our updated version of the working paper, prepared for this PrepCom, opens with this assessment of the current political environment.

“The Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, with its attendant nuclear threats, brings into sharp focus the increasing risks of nuclear war by accident, miscalculation, crisis escalation and/or intent that make disarmament that much more urgent. Direct, coercive threats by Russia to use nuclear weapons have been made to defend the invasion and annexation of Ukraine territory, as well as public tests of nuclear-capable missiles and forward deployment of nuclear weapons to a neighboring State (Belarus) to demonstrate a high level of willingness to use the weapons. The Ukraine war also has demonstrated the dangers of 21st century warfare, with its mix of missiles, missile defenses, aircraft, unpiloted vehicles, ever more complex earth-and space-based sensing and communications technologies, and disruptive electronic and cyberwarfare pushing the pace and complexity of war to the limits of human comprehension.

The intensifying array of antagonisms among nuclear-armed governments, of which the Ukraine war is just one manifestation, are accelerating a broad-spectrum multipolar arms race. Fast-developing technologies are creating new non-nuclear capabilities of strategic significance and are being incorporated into new or modernized systems for delivering nuclear weapons and for defending against them. All this has led as well to the temptations and perils of applying artificial intelligence to weapons systems, amidst a more general high-stakes AI technology competition.

And the European theatre is not the only region experiencing increased tensions among nuclear armed states. These are also occurring in North-East Asia, South China Sea, South Asia and the Middle East.

Against this grim background, nuclear disarmament may appear as a prospect too distant to merit much attention in a dangerous and demanding present. But controlling nuclear weapons and charting a path towards their elimination always have been a mix of incremental measures undertaken in difficult times and long-term efforts to build the elements for a nuclear-weapon-free world. Treaties to limit nuclear arms and related technologies were negotiated in the depths of the Cold War, even while nuclear-armed states were engaged in active hostilities.

The United States and the Soviet Union completed the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty during the war in Vietnam, a war in which the U.S.S.R. provided weapons and assistance to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, including anti-aircraft systems (some with Soviet crews) that downed U.S. aircraft. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the only arms treaty that on its face requires its nuclear-armed parties to negotiate to eliminate their nuclear arsenals, entered into force for its 43 initial parties, including the nuclear-armed United States, United Kingdom, and U.S.S.R., at the height of that war in 1970. Arms control efforts continued through the Cold War, with additional treaties completed and broader preparatory work done both by governments and by elements of civil society, with both non-government experts and mass disarmament movements playing a substantial role.

All of this prepared the ground for more rapid progress when the largely unanticipated political developments that constituted “the end of the Cold War” occurred.

Equally important amidst the current crisis, we learned during the Cold War that even when the prospects for tangible disarmament progress are dim, negotiations between nuclear-armed adversaries can have other positive results. Negotiations allow the military and political leadership of the adversaries to better understand each other’s intentions, and their fears. They build broader channels of communication between military and government bureaucracies that can be of tremendous value when tensions rise.

Even those in nuclear-armed governments at war who do not believe the time is ripe to negotiate the end of hostilities currently underway should recognize the value of talking to their adversaries at every opportunity about limiting the most dangerous of all weapons, and about assuring that they will never be used. There is no fruitful goal that can be achieved by any government if its people and the means to sustain them do not survive. And no government has the right to put the existence of its people, or any other people, at risk merely to assure the government’s own political survival.

Thinking about how to prevent the use of nuclear weapons in the present and thinking about how to eliminate them entirely are complementary efforts. As long as nuclear weapons exist, it will always be the right time to be thinking concretely and constructively about how we will eliminate them, forever.”⁹

While many nuclear-weapon-free states have demonstrated their commitment to Article VI of the NPT by joining the TPNW, the same cannot be said of the original five nuclear-armed states, who in a 2018 joint statement declared: “[W]e reiterate our opposition to the Treaty on the

Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.... The TPNW fails to address the key issues that must be overcome to achieve lasting global nuclear disarmament.”¹⁰

The hard truth is that neither the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty nor the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons can achieve disarmament for the foreseeable future because none of the nuclear-armed states are willing to reimagine a global system based on “common security,” rather than nuclear coercion - euphemistically called deterrence.

It is therefore imperative that the 1995, 2000, and 2010 commitments be reaffirmed and implemented in good faith by *all* states. In addition, the International Court of Justice and the UN Human Rights Committee have affirmed a universal and unconditional obligation to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world. Implementation of these obligations is not contingent on world peace, but must be pursued at all times. Indeed, implementation of these obligations could also contribute to the building of confidence and peace. It’s time to refocus responsibility on the nuclear-armed states. A reconsideration of the Model Nuclear Weapons Convention is in order.

In our updated working paper, “[Abolition 2000 NWC Reset: Frameworks for a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World](#),”¹¹ we suggest a range of modalities and approaches to achieve and maintain a nuclear-weapon-free world. These include: negotiation of a comprehensive nuclear weapons convention or package of agreements; negotiation of a framework agreement which includes the legal commitment to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world, identifies the measures and pathways required in general terms, and provides a process for agreeing on details over time; and negotiation of protocols to the TPNW or related instruments which nuclear armed and allied states would sign as part of a process for them to join the TPNW and build the nuclear destruction, elimination, verification and compliance process through the TPNW, particularly its Article 4.

We also call on the nuclear-armed and nuclear sharing states to commit to a timeframe of no later than 2030 for the adoption of a framework, package of agreements or comprehensive nuclear weapons convention, and no later than 2045 for full implementation. This would fulfil the NPT Article VI and other international law obligations to achieve the global elimination of nuclear weapons no later than the 100th anniversary of the first use of nuclear weapons, the 75th anniversary of the NPT and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations.

Today, with four nuclear-armed countries possessing over 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons engaged directly or indirectly in a major war in Europe, the need for a renewed commitment to nuclear disarmament is more urgent than ever. Over three quarters of a century ago in the wake of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, philosopher Albert Camus called on the people of the world to demand that their governments come to their senses. It is a call that resounds again today: “Faced with the terrifying perspectives which are opening up to humanity, we can perceive even better that peace is the only battle worth waging. It is no longer a prayer, but an order which must rise up from people to their governments—the order to choose finally between hell and reason.”¹²

Our working paper is available on the literature table outside this Conference Room and on the Reaching Critical Will website. We also invite you to attend our side event next Tuesday, August 8, during the lunch break in Conference Room M4.

Thank you.

Citations

¹ [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons \(NPT\) – UNODA](#)

² [Founding Statement | Abolition 2000](#)

³ <http://disarmament.un.org/wmd/npt/1995dec2.htm> ([reachingcriticalwill.org](#))

⁴ [SoS_Cover_blue.indd \(ippnw.org\)](#)

⁵ [Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons – UNODA](#)

⁶ [2000FD.pdf \(reachingcriticalwill.org\)](#)

⁷ [W:/MSWDocs/ Finall/0732768E.doc \(ialana.info\)](#)

⁸ [Microsoft Word - NPT-CONF2010-50_Vol-I.doc \(reachingcriticalwill.org\)](#)

⁹ [NPT-2023-Working-Paper-Frameworks-for-a-Nuclear-Weapon-Free-World.pdf \(abolition2000.org\)](#)

¹⁰ [P5 Joint Statement on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ [NWC-working-paper-for-the-NPT-Review-Conference-Updated-25-July-2022.pdf \(abolition2000.org\)](#)

¹² Albert Camus, *Between Hell and Reason, Combat*, August 6, 1945, in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds., *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy*, (Stony Creek, Connecticut: 1998), p. 261