

PREVENTION IS THE ONLY OPTION

Are We Finally Sick of Nuclear Weapons?

Robert M. Gould, MD

Paramount among the issues of trust raised in our Presidential election were concerns focusing on the character of the person who would have their finger on the nuclear button. In his recent article “Preventing Sudden Unexpected Death on a Massive Scale” Dr. George Lundberg, Editor-at-Large of *Medscape Medical News*, writes, “To the greatest extent possible, physicians should endeavor to assure that the leaders who could authorize the first strike be mature, sane, cool under pressure, loving humanity and their lives and families, capable of exercising self-control, crisis-tested, and who fully comprehend the enduring consequences.”¹

At the same time, our risks of annihilation are tied more fundamentally to the historic systems of nuclear war fighting and targeting that are beyond the design and capability of any individual. This is underscored by hundreds of examples showing how close the world has come to accidental and catastrophic detonations of nuclear weapons, as amply documented in Eric Schlosser’s 2014 “Command and Control,” recently released as a gripping and ominous movie for our times.

In clear violation of their Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, the U.S., Russia, and all other nuclear weapons states (NWS) at the United Nations (UN) Review Conference in 2015 once again refused to move towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. Our own government instead has made a commitment towards modernizing our nuclear arsenal at an estimated cost of one trillion dollars over the next thirty years (four million dollars an hour),² a decision spurring other dangerous weapons programs throughout the world.

The twin U.S. policy of promoting global export of nuclear power also fosters weapons proliferation. An egregious example has been the U.S.-India nuclear deal, which allows India, a non-signatory to the NPT, to receive advanced nuclear technologies and redirect its budget towards weapons development. Pakistan has responded by increasing its production of weapons-grade fissile materials and warheads, raising the stakes of regional conflict exemplified by the recent exacerbation of hostilities in Kashmir.

Even a nuclear exchange of approximately one hundred “small” Hiroshima-sized weapons would likely cause twenty million regional deaths due to the predictable consequences of heat, blast and radiation. Moreover, recent studies indicate that the nuclear-incineration of numerous cities in South Asia in such a scenario would have dread global consequences. With sunlight blocked by the massive amount of soot and other debris caused by the infernos, it is estimated that over a decade there would be a massive crash in global production of crops such as maize, rice, and wheat that could result in the worldwide deaths of a range of one to two billion people.^{3,4}

Such updated information regarding the “Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons” has revitalized a global movement exemplified by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), supported by Physicians for Social Responsibility and its global affiliates in the 1985 Nobel-Prize winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). With the NWS blocking any move towards the elimination of nuclear weapons within the NPT process, this movement has pressed the development of a treaty to ban nuclear weapons modeled on the successful (Land) Mine Ban Treaty adopted in 1997.

This campaign has drawn the increasing support of numerous world and religious leaders, Nobel Prize laureates, and the vast majority of the world’s nations. Numerous global health organizations such as the International Red Cross and the International Red Crescent have joined the call to abolish nuclear weapons, and in June 2015 the American Medical Association adopted a resolution urging “the U.S. and all national governments to continue to work to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons.”⁵ Early in 2016, the World Federation of Public Health Associations, the World Medical Association, and the International Council of Nurses, representing over seventeen million global health professionals worldwide, joined IPPNW in a statement declaring, “The only way to prevent the use of nuclear weapons is to ban and eliminate them.”⁶

Such a ban was recently endorsed at the UN by 123 nations, that, resisting great pressure by the U.S. government and opposition of most of the NWS, voted to begin negotiations in 2017 on a new treaty to prohibit the possession of nuclear weapons. At a time of daily reminders of the increasing dangers of nuclear conflict posed by U.S.-Russian flashpoints ranging from Ukraine to Syria, this vote by the majority of the world’s nations is a wake-up call to stem our collective slide towards species suicide, and echoes Dr. Lundberg’s concluding advice for our times: “There is no adequate medical response to nuclear war. Prevention is the only option.”



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A full list of references is available at www.sfms.org.