

Public Statement Submitted to the 2018 UN General Assembly First Committee

by Faith Communities Concerned about Nuclear Weapons

October 16, 2018, New York

Article 26 of the United Nations Charter envisages the “establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources.” However, in the decades since the adoption of the Charter, the world has committed immense stores of material, economic, technical and intellectual resources to the production and maintenance of a vast and growing array of armaments. Far from ensuring peace and security, these preparations for war and violence have locked states into the “security dilemma” of escalating mistrust and fear. They have inflamed and entrenched conflicts throughout world, bringing unimaginable suffering to vast numbers of people. These armaments have squandered precious resources that could be used to meet human needs, hampered human development and human rights, and undermined the cause of human security. They have not made the world safer.

We share the concern expressed by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in “Securing Our Common Future,” that the world today stands on the “brink of a new cold war.” We fully support the Secretary-General’s call to tackle this new reality through disarmament to save humanity, disarmament that saves lives and disarmament for future generations.

To its enduring credit, the UN has proven itself as a forum for building new norms and treaties in arms control and disarmament. Recent examples include the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), which is examining the use of unmanned and increasingly autonomous weapons systems. Such processes demand sustained international commitment. They have shed light on the need to improve compliance, capacity and transparency throughout the chain by which arms are designed and manufactures to where they are put to use. Multilateral forums on drones and lethal autonomous weapons are essential because new technologies must not be allowed to escape ethical and legal restraints under a collective commitment to the rule of law.

Lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) are weapon systems that can select and engage individual targets without meaningful human control. Such weapons are unlikely to be able to adhere to International Humanitarian Law as it is unlikely that they will be able to properly distinguish between civilians and combatants, or to make a proportionality assessment. While the deployment of LAWS might reduce military casualties, it could lower the threshold for the use of force. These weapons could lead to accidental and rapid escalation of conflict as fully autonomous weapons react and interact with each other at speeds beyond human control.

As people of faith, we share common concerns about fundamental moral and ethical questions that LAWS raise regarding to the right to life, the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law as well as the threat of a new international arms race. A machine should never be allowed to make the decisions of life and death. These concerns have led to movements urging the start of international negotiations on a legally binding instrument prohibiting lethal autonomous weapons systems.

Nuclear weapons manifest the dire results of new lethal technologies that have been allowed to escape the dictates of public conscience. The continued maintenance, modernization and proliferation of nuclear weapons systems represent the nadir of humanity's self-destructive impulses and a deplorable diversion of resources from the imperatives of sustainable human development.

As people of faith, we advocate for the right of all people to live in security and dignity; we seek to heed the commands of conscience and the call to justice; we are united in our determination to protect the vulnerable and to exercise the stewardship that will safeguard Earth for present and future generations. Nuclear weapons profoundly violate all these values and commitments. We can never accept a conception of security that privileges the concerns of any state or nation over the good of the human and planetary whole. The horrific destructiveness of nuclear weapons makes their abolition the only path to authentic human security. In July of last year, in an important step toward a world free from nuclear weapons, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted by 122 governments. We strongly urge all States that have not yet done so to sign and ratify the TPNW.

Therefore, as people of faith, we urge the General Assembly to:

1. Address the issue of disarmament not only as integral to the security agenda seen from military and political perspectives but also as a moral and ethical imperative;
2. Heed the voices of the world's hibakusha (all the victims of nuclear weapons) and recommit to the unequivocal undertaking to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons;
3. Recognize that the fundamental justification for the TPNW is the prevention of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of such weapons and that its early entry into force is necessary;
4. Support proposals for substantive discussions in multilateral forums on a legally-binding instrument to prohibit LAWS.
