

STATEMENT

SAVE LIVES, STOP NUKES: Build back better to a nuclear-weapon-free world

A message from Shoya Yoshida, General Secretary of the ITUC-Asia Pacific,
on the International Day for the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, 26 September 2021

On 26 September 2013, the United Nations (UN) organised a high-level meeting of the General Assembly on nuclear disarmament for the first time. Subsequently, the UN declared 26 September as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, devoted to enhancing public awareness and education regarding the threat posed to humanity by nuclear weapons and the necessity for their total elimination.

More fatal than a global pandemic

COVID-19 has been a major threat to the world since early 2020. As a response, governments adopted widely criticised austerity policies that brought public health and medical care provision on the verge of collapse, especially in developing countries. As the spread of highly infectious coronavirus variants remain a threat, governments are faced with the challenge of enforcing preventive measures and an appeal for international cooperation in developing and disseminating vaccines.

While majority of the world's population continues to grapple with the impacts of the pandemic, some countries are busy fortifying their military power by investing in nuclear weapons. In particular, concerns have intensified with regard to the United States-Russian nuclear arms control regime, the rapid expansion of Chinese nuclear and conventional forces, the Iranian nuclear development, and the increasing number of nuclear warheads and missiles in North Korea.

The nine nuclear-armed states, namely, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, collectively possessed an estimated 13,080 nuclear weapons at the start of 2021.

The tragic experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed us that once nuclear weapons are used, countless human lives are lost. Casualties from the use of nuclear weapons in one day can be more than the deaths from COVID-19; moreover, damages and impacts on healthcare systems, jobs, infrastructures, and economies are greater and more enduring.

It is crucial to note that nuclear warfare, even on a relatively small scale, could endanger humankind. At a time when the world is reeling from the impacts of the pandemic, investments in the development of nuclear weapons could have been redirected to strengthening healthcare and social protection systems, creating jobs, and producing vaccines.

Nuclear weapons have no place in a world that we aim to build back better.

The TPNW comes into force

The move to eliminate nuclear weapons began with the recognition of the enormous humanitarian disaster that such nuclear weapons could cause. It came to fruition with the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017 that took effect on 22 January 2021. Unfortunately, none of the nine nuclear weapon states have joined the TPNW. Meanwhile, the member-states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other allies of the US have claimed that they cannot join the TPNW because they depend on the US nuclear deterrence. Thus, an immediate future free from nuclear weapons seems bleak.

However, this does not mean that there is no hope for a truly peaceful world. There is a growing public voice globally that advocates for increasing the membership of the TPNW. If the number of countries participating in the TPNW gradually increases and becomes a majority, the norm that nuclear weapons should not be manufactured, stored, or used will be strengthened.

Know, speak, and appeal

How can we encourage the majority of states in the world, including nuclear-armed states to ratify the TPNW? How can we reinforce public opinions that no nuclear weapons are needed and that oppose national security policies that rely on nuclear deterrence? What can trade unions do to those ends?

First and foremost, we should be aware of the threat and devastation that nuclear weapons pose to humankind. We should speak out against these weapons, discuss their inhumanity with families and friends in the workplace and in the community, and appeal for the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

However, many people do not have a clear image of the devastating and atrocious impacts nuclear weapons.

In Japan, where I was born, two nuclear weapons were detonated over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945, respectively. These atomic bombs constitute the only occasions in human history when nuclear weapons were used in armed conflict. The bombs killed between 150,000 and 246,000 people across the two cities, most of whom were innocent civilians, including women and children. Not only did the nuclear weapons cause immediate bloodshed, but they also caused health problems and the discrimination of Hibakusha (people affected by exposure to the nuclear weapons), even their second and third generations. Happy lives, bright futures, and dignity were taken away from them.

I had the opportunity to accompany a friend of mine to the Peace Rallies which the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC) holds every year in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Originally from a country in Africa, my friend had been a schoolteacher before becoming a full-time trade union officer. He said to me, "I remember using a textbook to teach the children in my own country about the tragedy that occurred in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Seeing the photos and relics and hearing the testimonies of Hibakusha first-hand shocked me. What I have seen and heard were incomparable with the small photo in the textbook."

Even if you do not visit Japan, you can experience the destruction by viewing the websites of the [Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum](#) and the [Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum](#). These museums convey the barbarity and inhumanity of nuclear weapons to the people of the world. Please visit their websites to understand why the world has no place for nuclear weapons.

Solidarity for peace

Any use of nuclear weapons is abhorrent to the principles of humanity and dictates of public conscience. This is why we reiterate our call on the international community to immediately sign and ratify the TPNW. Governments that have not signed or ratified the TPNW must immediately address this omission.

Treading the steep path to a nuclear-weapon-free world requires the power of the diverse people living in that era as well as the solidarity of the current and future generations that deserve a just and peaceful world. The most urgent task is for each of us to be a peace bearer, who not only recognises the threats of nuclear weapons and but is also empowered to demand for a nuclear-weapons-free world.

The ITUC-Asia Pacific remains committed to building workers' power and solidarity for peace and disarmament. We say yes to jobs, health, and rights; we say no to nuclear weapons!

SHOYA YOSHIDA
General Secretary
ITUC-Asia Pacific