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Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Day: Time for action on nuclear weapons

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Tomorrow, 1 March, is Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Day - the 60th anniversary of the largest nuclear weapon detonation, the 'Bravo' nuclear bomb test conducted by the United States close to the surface of Bikini Atoll, in the Marshall Islands - a particularly poignant reminder of the crucial importance of the elimination of nuclear weapons for our region, the Pacific, and beyond.

Communities immediately downwind of the Bravo detonation suffered exposure to fatal levels of radioactivity, and the blast created a fallout cloud which covered Rongelap Atoll (100 miles away) and Utrik Atoll (320 miles away). Fallout from just this one nuclear weapon detonation spread over more than 7,000 square miles, and traces were detected throughout the Pacific, in India, Japan, the United States and Europe.

The catastrophic consequences of that detonation, along with the other 66 nuclear weapons tests in the area, on the health of the Marshallese people and on the environment are well documented, for example, in the Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on his 2012 visit to the Marshall Islands and the United States: *"The nuclear testing resulted in both immediate and continuing effects on the human rights of the Marshallese. According to information received by the Special Rapporteur, radiation from the testing resulted in fatalities and in acute and long-term health complications. The effects of radiation have been exacerbated by near-irreversible environmental contamination, leading to the loss of livelihoods and lands"*.¹

Just two weeks ago, the Mexican government hosted the second international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons (the Nayarit conference), which concluded that: the immediate and long-term effects of even a single nuclear weapon detonation, let alone a nuclear exchange, would be catastrophic; that as more states deploy more nuclear weapons on higher levels of combat readiness, the risks of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional use of these weapons grow significantly; and that no state or international organization has the capacity to address or provide the short and long term humanitarian assistance and protection needed in case of a nuclear weapon detonation, nor would it be possible to establish such capacities.

As with the first international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, hosted by Norway last year, the evidence presented at the Nayarit conference lead to the conclusion that the very existence of nuclear weapons is a massive threat to global peace and security, and that the unacceptable consequences of any use clearly means nuclear weapons must be banned.

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand is pleased that the New Zealand government was represented at the Nayarit conference, along with 145 other states, and spoke of the harmful consequences of nuclear detonations in the Pacific. New Zealand's final statement to the conference included: *"Our meeting here has helped to underline the terrible risk that nuclear weapons continue to pose for us all. This is not a risk that we should force our societies to face. It is a risk that we must act to eliminate."*

Strong words, but not as strongly worded as the joint statement by other Pacific nations:

Pacific Island nations have long called for a world free of nuclear weapons. Today, we reiterate our firm belief that the only way to guarantee that these terrible weapons of mass destruction are never used again is to ban and eliminate them.

It is unacceptable that the deadliest weapons of all nuclear weapons are the only weapons of mass destruction not yet expressly prohibited by an international convention. A treaty banning the use, manufacture and possession of nuclear weapons is long overdue. This conference has demonstrated that there is a clear humanitarian imperative for us to start negotiations.

Nuclear-free nations, which make up the vast majority of the international community, should not sit back and wait for the nuclear-armed nations to lead the way. We must set the agenda ourselves.²

When announcing that Austria would host a follow up conference to Nayarit, the Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian pointed out: *“Nuclear weapons are not only a permanent threat to all humankind but also a relic of the cold war that we must finally overcome. International nuclear disarmament efforts require an urgent paradigm shift, not the least in light of the danger of further nuclear weapons proliferation.”* In his concluding statement, the Nayarit conference Chair stated: *“It is time to take action. The 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks [2015] is the appropriate milestone to achieve our goal. Nayarit is a point of no return.”*

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand agrees that action to abolish nuclear weapons is long overdue and that 2015 is an appropriate date to accomplish that goal. In 2012, the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee’s Report on the iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand petition to Parliament concluded: *“New Zealand should move beyond a position of general support to the forefront of negotiations towards a nuclear weapons convention.”*

We therefore call on the New Zealand government to now move to the forefront of negotiations as recommended by the Select Committee, and to make a clear public statement of New Zealand’s support for negotiations to begin on a global ban on nuclear weapons, using a fast-track diplomatic process such as the Oslo process on cluster munitions, and their preparedness to take a leading role in this, including hosting a diplomatic conference in Wellington.

Such a crucial contribution to global peace and security would not only be of immense benefit to the international community, but would also assist with New Zealand’s current bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

About iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand: iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand is the one of the national campaigns of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (iCAN), which also has more than 300 partner organisations in 80 countries around the world.

iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand has nineteen supporting organisations, fifteen national and four local NGOs. In common with the other iCAN national campaigns, our goal is the elimination of nuclear weapons through a global treaty to ban their possession, production, deployment, use and threat of use. More information about iCAN Aotearoa New Zealand, updates and resources are available at <http://www.icanw.org.nz>

¹ Mission to the Marshall Islands: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes, 3 September 2012, A/HRC/21/48/Add.1

² Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu, joint statement to the Second international Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons