



ICRC

International Conference
on the
Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

Oslo, 4-5 March 2013

Statement by
Peter Maurer, President
International Committee of the Red Cross

On 30 August 1945 Dr Marcel Junod, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Japan, received a chilling cable from an ICRC representative in Hiroshima. The cable read as follows: *“Conditions appalling. City wiped out. Eighty percent of all hospitals destroyed or seriously damaged. Inspected two emergency hospitals, conditions beyond description. Effect of bomb mysteriously serious. Many victims apparently recovering suddenly suffer fatal relapse due to decomposition of white blood cells and other internal injuries, now dying in great numbers. Estimated still over one hundred thousand wounded in emergency hospitals located surroundings. Sadly lacking bandaging materials, medicines.”*

On his arrival in Hiroshima, Marcel Junod came face-to-face with the grim reality of medical care after an atomic bombing of a city and its medical infrastructure. In addition to the destruction and damage to hospitals mentioned in the cable, the impact on those meant to care for the sick and wounded was equally severe: 90% of Hiroshima's doctors were killed or injured by the explosion, as were 92% of the city's nurses and 80% of its pharmacists. There was a desperate need for blood but no possibility of blood transfusions as most potential donors were either dead or injured. To put it bluntly, the city's capacity to treat victims had been wiped out. As a result, there was little or no health-care provision in the immediate aftermath of the explosion.

This same catastrophic scenario – and more – awaits us if nuclear weapons are ever used again. While the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons increased dramatically during the Cold War, the capacity of States and international agencies to assist the victims did not. As you will hear tomorrow, the ICRC has over the past six years made an in-depth assessment of its own capacity, and that of other agencies, to help the victims of nuclear, radiological, biological and chemical weapons. We have concluded that an effective means of assisting a substantial portion of survivors of a nuclear detonation, while adequately protecting those delivering assistance, is not currently available at national level and not feasible at international level. It is highly unlikely that the immense investment required to develop such capacity will ever be made. If made, it would likely remain insufficient.

In April 2010, my predecessor, Jakob Kellenberger, spoke of this state of affairs in a statement to Geneva's diplomatic community. In this statement the ICRC made four key points:

- Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power, in the unspeakable human suffering they cause, in the impossibility of controlling their effects in space and time, in the risks of escalation they create, and in the threat they pose to the environment, to future generations, and indeed to the survival of humanity.
- It is difficult to envisage how any use of nuclear weapons could be compatible with the rules of international humanitarian law.
- Regardless of their views on the legality of nuclear weapons, States must ensure that they are never again used.
- Preventing the use of nuclear weapons requires fulfilment of existing obligations to pursue negotiations aimed at prohibiting and completely eliminating such weapons through a legally binding international treaty.

We are encouraged by the response to the ICRC's appeal in 2010. Since then, the 190 States party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons have recognized the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear

weapons” and the relevance of international humanitarian law in this regard. Those States have also reaffirmed the call made by the United Nations Security Council at its summit in 2009, and by Presidents Obama and Medvedev earlier that year, to move towards a world free of nuclear weapons. In 2011 the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement made a historic appeal on nuclear weapons, in the same vein as that of the ICRC. In it, the Movement undertook to raise awareness among the public, scientists, health professionals and decision-makers of its ongoing concerns and to promote the norm of non-use and the elimination of nuclear weapons among governments and the public. In October 2012 the Movement’s concerns were reflected in a statement made by 34 States to the UN General Assembly’s First Committee.

The ICRC warmly welcomes the Norwegian Government’s initiative to convene this conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Although nuclear weapons have been debated in military, technical and geopolitical terms for decades, it is astounding that States have never before come together to address their humanitarian consequences.

In our view, no informed political or legal position on these weapons can be adopted without a detailed grasp of the immediate consequences of these weapons on human beings and on medical and other infrastructure. It is also essential to understand the long-term effects on human health and on the genetics of survivors; consequences that have been confirmed by research and have been witnessed and treated for nearly seven decades by the Japanese Red Cross hospitals in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In addition, one cannot ignore the insight offered by modern climate science into the implications of nuclear weapon use for the world’s climate and food production. And last, but by no means least, States must answer the question: Who will assist the victims of these weapons and how? The next two days provide a unique and historic opportunity to begin addressing these fundamental issues.

In closing, I am confident that, as you broach these issues, you will share the ICRC’s commitment to prevent any future use of nuclear weapons. I also hope that you will be driven by the sense of opportunity generated by this conference and by the belief that the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons must be at the centre of the debate. This is an important moment to recognize and understand these consequences, thus ensuring that they are central to future discussions.

And yet, an awareness of the consequences of nuclear weapons will not be enough to definitively prevent the use of and bring about the elimination of nuclear weapons. Public awareness, media interest and the sustained commitment of responsible State authorities are crucial. The international community has not always seized upon opportunities to prevent human suffering. In the case of nuclear weapons, prevention – including the development of a legally binding treaty to prohibit and eliminate such weapons – is the only way forward.

Thank you.