

20 Questions on a Nuclear Weapons Convention

Nuclear weapons are capable of destroying human civilisation and most other lifeforms in a matter of hours. A single nuclear bomb, if dropped on a city, could kill millions of people.

01 What is a Nuclear Weapons Convention?

A Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC) is a worldwide treaty which would ban nuclear weapons permanently and ensure their elimination.

02 What would be banned under a NWC?

A NWC would make it illegal to develop, test, produce, stockpile, transfer, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. It would ban the production of materials that could be used to make nuclear weapons, and require delivery vehicles to be destroyed or converted so that they couldn't be used to launch nuclear weapons.

03 Which countries have nuclear weapons?

Eight countries currently have nuclear weapons - the US, UK, Russia, France, China, India, Pakistan and Israel. North Korea also claims to have a nuclear weapons capability.

04 Don't nuclear weapons make us safer?

No, they make the world a much more dangerous place. There are an estimated 23,000 nuclear weapons in the world and just 50 of these weapons could kill 200 million people. The continued possession of nuclear weapons risks their use by accident, miscalculation or by terrorists.

05 How would a NWC work?

A NWC would require all countries which have nuclear weapons to destroy them in stages. They would have to take nuclear weapons off high alert, remove warheads from their delivery vehicles and disable them. The UN would control all the material that could be used to make nuclear warheads. The US and Russia, which have about 96% of all nuclear weapons in the world, would be required to make the deepest cuts.

06 Wouldn't some countries break the rules?

Under a NWC every country would have to open up its nuclear facilities and materials for inspection. An international monitoring system would make sure that no country was breaking the rules. This tightly controlled process would build confidence in a world without nuclear weapons.

07 What if terrorists get hold of nuclear weapons?

Nuclear weapons are weapons of terror, no matter who uses them. But a NWC would make it much more difficult for terrorist groups to steal or build a nuclear weapon, by scrapping all nuclear weapons and making sure all nuclear materials and facilities were protected and secure.

08 Don't we already have a treaty banning nuclear weapons?

Yes. The 1968 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) agreed that countries without nuclear weapons would not try to acquire them. In return, the countries with nuclear weapons who had joined the NPT would negotiate the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

09 What has the NPT achieved?

Forty years after the agreement of the NPT, there has been little progress in achieving a nuclear weapons-free world. States without nuclear weapons are looking for a new and fresh approach. A NWC would put us on track - for the first time - to nuclear weapons abolition.

10 Wouldn't a NWC clash with the NPT?

No. In 1996 the International Court of Justice ruled that NPT members are legally obliged to agree a treaty on disarmament. So a NWC would realise the NPT's disarmament goals.

11 Do any other disarmament agreements exist?

At the moment, treaties exist outlawing anti-personnel landmines, cluster bombs, biological weapons and chemical weapons. These agreements show that it would be possible to negotiate a treaty banning nuclear weapons - the most destructive weapons ever invented.

12 How many countries support a NWC?

At the NPT Review Conference in 2010, over 130 of the 192 UN member states supported a NWC. Furthermore, they called for work on a NWC to begin immediately. Many states support a NWC because they want a guaranteed timetable for disarmament.

13 Who else supports a NWC?

Opinion polls show that the overwhelming majority of citizens in the UK and in other nuclear weapon states want a global treaty banning nuclear weapons. Since November 2007, over 170 UK MPs have signed parliamentary petitions supporting a NWC.

14 Do any countries oppose a NWC?

Of the states which have nuclear weapons, France, Russia, the UK and the US oppose a NWC.

15 Why doesn't the UK government support a NWC?

The government says that it believes a NWC is 'premature' and that it is more important to strengthen the NPT. However, several eminent public figures have dismissed these arguments, arguing that a NWC is the simplest and most direct route to a world without nuclear weapons. Furthermore, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon backs a NWC and included it in his five point plan for nuclear disarmament.

16 Why should the UK scrap its nuclear weapons?

Nuclear weapons can't solve any of the serious problems we face. They are extremely expensive, too destructive to use, and don't deter attacks. Even senior military figures say that nuclear weapons are useless in the modern world.

If replaced, the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system could cost as much as £100 billion over its lifetime. That money could be spent on what people really need - schools, hospitals and green energy. If the UK shows it doesn't need nuclear weapons, others will follow suit. However, if we keep our nuclear weapons, other countries are likely to want them.

17 What action should the UK government take?

For a start, the UK should make a legally-binding promise never to attack a non-nuclear weapon state with nuclear weapons. We should also adopt a 'No First Use' policy - a pledge never to begin a nuclear exchange. The UK should then scrap plans to replace Trident, end Trident submarine patrols and store the warheads safely ashore.

18 How quickly could we have a NWC?

Once governments have the political will, a NWC could be achieved very quickly. For example, in July 1963, the Partial Test Ban Treaty was agreed after only 10 days of negotiations. Before that there had been years of deadlock.

19 Is there a campaign for a NWC?

Yes. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) was launched in 2007. ICAN is a global grassroots movement calling for global nuclear disarmament through a legally binding, verifiable and timebound treaty. ICAN-UK is the British branch - find out more online at icanw.org.uk.

20 What can I do to support a NWC?

There are lots of things you can do. For example, you could write to your MP and ask him or her to support a NWC. You could also write a letter to your local newspaper explaining why the UK should scrap Trident and back a NWC, organise a meeting, or raise the issue at your trade union, church or social group. ICAN-UK can supply speakers and campaign materials.

Visit icanw.org.uk for more campaigning ideas, news and information on a NWC.

For further information contact:

ICAN-UK
www.icanw.org.uk

The Grayston Centre
28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT
+44 (0)20 7324 4739

Email: tim_street@icanw.org