

Treating Britain's harmful dependence on nuclear weapons



Medact is a membership organisation of health professionals committed to a safer, fairer and better world.

Following the United National General Assembly adoption of The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in July 2017, Medact published 'A Safer World, Treating Britain's Harmful Dependence on Nuclear Weapons', to encourage the health community to support international efforts to ban nuclear weapons.

This briefing provides a summary of the findings of that report with additional updated information.

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The UK's nuclear arsenal

- The UK possesses around 240 nuclear weapons: the explosive power of each being about eight times greater than that of the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in 1945
- 120 of these weapons are operational, and around 40 are deployed at any given time.
- A further 95 weapons are in reserve.
- The UK is currently planning to replace its nuclear weapons and delivery system, Trident. This could cost £205 billion over 40 years.
- There have been 110 known accidents, near misses and dangerous occurrences in the history of the UK's nuclear weapons programme.

The Consequences of Nuclear War

Immediate effects of a nuclear blast

During a nuclear detonation, temperatures on the ground reach **several million degrees centigrade** killing even those sheltering underground. Further away from the blast, any survivors of the immediate blast would be dying from burns, internal bleeding and injuries caused by flying debris.

Following a nuclear attack any **immediate emergency service response would be futile** because of the complete devastation caused to infrastructure. Even if some medics could treat those not killed instantly, they would lack the resources to provide meaningful care.

Survivors who are exposed to the flash would suffer from **acute radiation syndrome**. Victims exposed to high doses would most likely die within hours.



Japanese city of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the world's first nuclear attack in 1945

Long-term effects of a nuclear blast

Impacts on health

Those less exposed to the immediate effects of the blast may respond initially to modern supportive treatment but, as a result of their exposure to radiation, long-term survivors are more likely to suffer from cancer, blood related disorders, cardiovascular complications (atheroma, strokes, heart attacks), cataracts, and chronic diseases of other organs such as kidneys.

Impacts on the environment

Nuclear famine, or a 'Nuclear Winter', refers to the impact of the huge amount of soot thrown into the atmosphere following nuclear detonations on cities. By dimming sunlight for years, food-growing seasons are shortened and food production reduced even in nations remote from the bombed cities.

As a result of food shortages and severely disrupted communications, over one billion people could die of starvation in the years following nuclear war, such as one between India and Pakistan.

International Law and Nuclear Weapons

The **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)** was ratified in 1970 and requires states without nuclear weapons to agree not to acquire them, while those with nuclear weapons are committed to progress 'in good faith' towards nuclear disarmament.

However, it has failed to prevent India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel from becoming nuclear weapon states (NWS), and all the NWS are modernising their nuclear forces at a worldwide cost of one trillion dollars per decade.

Frustrations among many nations which ratified the NPT led the United Nations General Assembly to adopt, in July 2017, a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons — the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)**.

The TPNW includes undertakings **not to develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons**. The Treaty also prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons on national territory and bans providing any technical support for States carrying out prohibited activity.

On 22 January 2021 the Treaty formally entered into force and became binding international law. The states that have ratified the treaty must now comply with its prohibitions and obligations and are also legally bound to urge more states to ratify.



Government's from across the world discuss legal measures to bring about a nuclear free world at a United Nations working group on Nuclear Disarmament in 2016.



The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is a coalition of non-governmental organisations in one hundred countries promoting adherence to and implementation of the United Nations nuclear weapon ban treaty.

References

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How can local governments support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons?

- Join cities and towns around the world and in the UK in signing up to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) Cities Appeal.
- Lobby national government and local MPs to engage with and support the TPNW.
- Engage local residents on the risks associated with nuclear weapons and opportunities to work toward global disarmament, through the media and events.
- Divest any public funds from companies involved with nuclear weapons.

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