

**SCIENCE**  
**PEOPLE**  
**&**  
**POLITICS**

# IN THE SHADOW OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

**A UN high-level meeting on total elimination of nuclear weapons met 2 October 2020.**

By Helen Gavaghan

**THE PRESIDENT ON THE UNITED NATIONS' GENERAL ASSEMBLY** opened his remarks to the UN's meeting on nuclear weapons with the stark warning that progress toward a world free from nuclear weapons has stalled and is at risk of backsliding. António Guterres, general secretary of the UN, said that nuclear disarmament has been a UN priority since the organisation's inception, yet some States today see nuclear weapons as central to their security. There is an arms race developing, based not on numbers, but on faster and stealthier weapons. The cost is staggering and Guterres urged the Russian Federation and the US to extend a new Treaty limiting and reducing offensive arms. 90 percent of the world nuclear weapons are held by the US and Russian Federation. Guterres' message was that in today's tense world only the total elimination of nuclear weapons can guarantee there is no catastrophe which would damage all life on Earth\*.

This is a crucial time for nuclear weapon control. Like everything else in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted arms control, forcing postponement of a review of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) until 2021. Broadly speaking under the terms of the NPT, Nuclear Weapon States are supposed to disarm themselves of nuclear, while non-nuclear weapon states commit to not acquiring them. Despite decades of arms control negotiations the world is still divided into nuclear weapons states (NWS), who are not disarming, and non-nuclear weapon states, who are wondering when the NWS will begin honouring the intent of the NPT. What will be decided next year when the parties to the NPT sit down to talk, and how will the new treaty banning nuclear weapons, which comes into force in January, sit alongside the NPT? Guterres urged delegates to the NPT to make meaningful progress, and he welcomed the new Nuclear Ban Treaty which some members are keen to see succeed.

African delegations reminded the meeting of the Continent's desire to remain a nuclear-free zone and of the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty, known colloquially as the Pelindaba Treaty. The futility of such a treaty should nuclear-weapon states begin hurling nuclear bombs at each other was made poignantly obvious by speakers from Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Palau, The Marshall Islands Fiji all raised their voice to tell of the consequences they still experience from atmospheric tests in the second half of the twentieth century, and of delays in compensation and insufficient compensation. David Kabua, president of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, spoke of people displaced from their

atoll so that nuclear testing could go ahead. There are impacts for generations, said Kabua. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasago of Equatorial Guinea said nuclear weapons are a severe threat to our existence. He asked what is the point of manufacturing, maintaining and updating them if we are already aware of the consequences of using them.

The aim of the meeting was to bring nuclear disarmament back to the centre of public debate.

Without the United Nations and their on-demand video service the voices of the small countries would be drowned out, as they were when their land was used as a base for atmospheric nuclear testing. After 75 years in the shadow of nuclear weapons can the internet and the UN's videos get the personal messages of small countries before the global general public? In a world where some members of the UN are talking of resuming nuclear testing is there a Greta Thunberg who will say to the nuclear-weapon states, "How Dare You?" How dare you threaten to poison my world?

---

**\*The position I am adopting as editor of *Science, People & Politics* is that to break the deadlock a trusted third party is needed to hold on behalf of the United Nations the expertise associated with nuclear weapons, not so that they can be used ever, but so that they can never again be invented.**

---

**UN On Demand Video Service. Statements on 2 October 2020 at the UN High Level meeting for the total elimination of all nuclear weapons. 3 hours.**

<http://webtv.un.org/search/part-1-general-assembly-high-level-plenary-meeting-to-commemorate-and-promote-the-international-day-for-the-total-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons/6196982749001/?term=&lan=english&page=10> Accessed 31.12.2020 Accessed again on 1.1.2021.

**Meeting coverage in-house from the UN**

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/ga12276.doc.htm> Accessed 31.12.2020 and again on 1.1.2021.

**In 2021 *Science, People & Politics* will take a close look at the other side of the nuclear coin with an article about the International Atomic Energy Agency. (Atoms for Peace).**

Editor: Helen Gavaghan.

Deputy editor: Fred Pearce FRSGS.

Editorial advisors:

Professor Graham Dutfield.

Dr Ferdinando Patat

Mr Fred Pearce FRSGS

Mr Martin Redfern

Published by Gavaghan Communications.

165 Longfellow Court, Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, HX7 5LG.

