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Pursue a Verifiable Agreement Among Nuclear Armed States to Eliminate their Nuclear Arsenals

“August 6, 1945. The sky was covered with the blue light. The atomic bomb exploded over the city of Hiroshima. 130,000 people disappeared. One scene I cannot forget is the little black bundle of a baby and the mother was still hanging on to this little thing. Many people suffered radiation sickness. Today, 73 years later some of the atomic bomb survivors are still suffering with cancer, leukemia, and the radiation sickness. We must abolish the atomic and nuclear weapon so no one will ever use it again on human beings. We must pursue the peace of the world.” **Junji Sarashina**, President, American Society of Hiroshima-Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivors

Today, some 12,700 nuclear weapons remain in the world’s arsenals—with about 90 percent owned by the United States and Russia. Both countries are actively planning to build new weapons, sparking a 21st century arms race and increasing the risk of nuclear war.

Meanwhile, many of the Cold War’s most dangerous nuclear policies remain unchanged. In the United States, the president can order the launch of nuclear weapons without consulting anyone. And US policy allows the president to use nuclear weapons against an adversary in a “first strike”, in essence to start a nuclear war.

Given the extraordinary destructive power of nuclear weapons, it should be the highest US national security priority to seek the elimination of these weapons — those possessed by other countries and those in our own arsenal. Even our own nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to our survival. Recent studies have shown that the use of any significant portion of our nuclear arsenal against cities, even against an adversary who never fired back, could cause worldwide climate disruption and global famine. The United States needs to initiate negotiations with all of the nuclear weapons states on a verifiable agreement to eliminate these weapons.

The United States — like Britain, China, France and Russia — is already obligated under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to take concrete steps toward eliminating its nuclear arsenal. Nations that joined the NPT as non-nuclear-weapons states, pledging that they would not develop their own nuclear weapons, did so in part on the basis of this promise of disarmament. These states have become increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress among the nuclear weapons states toward meeting their treaty obligations.

One response to this frustration was the negotiation of the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)**, which was approved in July 2017 by 122 states and has so far been signed by 84 countries. The treaty is modeled on existing treaties outlawing other types of weapons considered inhumane, such as biological and chemical weapons, land mines, and cluster munitions, and makes it illegal under international law to “develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess, or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.” The TPNW reached the required 50 states ratifications on October 24, 2020 and is entering into force in January 2021.

The United States refused to participate in the negotiating process and has continued to actively encourage states to reject the TPNW. This attitude has not served it well and must change. The US and the other eight nuclear-armed nations should live up to their responsibility to begin negotiations now for a verifiable, enforceable, time bound agreement to dismantle nuclear weapons. Such an agreement can be implemented through the TPNW under its Article 4 provisions.

