

The Humanitarian Dimension of Nuclear Weapons

Oslo, 4-5 March 2013

Remarks by Ireland at the opening session

I would like to thank the Government of Norway for convening this conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. It is a timely contribution to the international discussion on nuclear disarmament and an important contribution to expanding our understanding of the potential damage and destruction which would be caused by a detonation of a nuclear weapon, whether deliberate or accidental.

I would also like to commend the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) for the civil society conference which it organised here in Oslo on 2-3 March. Ireland welcomes and supports the contribution which civil society is making to the international debate on the future of nuclear weapons.

Foreign Minister Eide, in his opening remarks to us, called for a fact-based approach to assessing the potential humanitarian consequences that would arise where a nuclear device ever to be detonated.

My own Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore, when speaking last week at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, described these consequences as 'catastrophic, unmanageable and immoral.'

Ireland has grave concerns about the ability of any of our societies, or the international community as a whole, to respond individually or collectively in anything approaching an adequate manner should the unthinkable occur. The expert presentations we have just heard, including from the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, have confirmed the worst of these fears.

Although we sit on an island at the edge of Europe, we have only to recall the speed with which the effects of the Chernobyl accident were detected in the skies above Ireland to understand that the consequences of an explosion would be felt far beyond the area most immediately affected. Indeed, if we reflect that our world has become immeasurably more connected in the years since then, we must pause to consider carefully the appalling impact on our way of life that would result from even a limited use of these weapons.

The presentations that we have heard raise a number of important questions, the first of which is why these weapons continue to exist.

We have been called here, however, to address the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and so the Irish delegation wishes to focus its questions on the following areas of concern:

- Given what we have heard from the expert presentations could we realistically mount a meaningful humanitarian response?
- Would a meaningful measure of international coordination of such a response be possible? If so, who would be responsible for that coordination and how would it be effected?
- What would be the impact on communications? We recall the disruption caused a few years ago by volcanic ash. Would air or other forms of transport be possible?
- Given what we know about the effects on those exposed to radiation and radio-active fall-out in the affected areas, would there be a conflict between a duty of care to first responders and the humanitarian impulse to help?
- Finally, what would be the impact of panic, fear and lack of information in those areas not immediately affected by an explosion? Would these be factors which might hinder or even preclude any meaningful humanitarian response?
- Indeed, given what we know about the potential global consequences of a nuclear explosion, is it meaningful to talk of a difference between immediately affected areas and the rest of our planet?

Mr Chairman,

These are just some of the many questions which my delegation and, I am sure, many other delegations in this room wish to discuss. We look forward to taking forward this discussion over the next two days and to fully understanding the risk and threat which the existence of nuclear weapons poses to our human family.

Thank you