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Ensuring success of the 2018 UN High Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament:

UNFOLD ZERO consultations – January 2017

Vienna, Geneva, New York and Washington

Introduction:

In 2013 the UN General Assembly decided under Resolution 68/32 to convene a *UN High Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament* no later than 2018 in order to support the total elimination of nuclear weapons, including through negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention. As yet, the date for this conference is not set, but it is expected to be in September 2018.

UN Summits and High Level Conferences are established by the UN General Assembly in order to elevate the political traction on key global issues. Such conferences garner the attention of media, elevate the issue within the government agencies, and provide opportunities for parliaments and public to challenge government policies and promote concrete goals. As such, UN High Level Conferences have had considerable success in recent years on difficult global issues.

The [2015 UN Sustainable Development Summit](#), which was held as a High Level Plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly, achieved agreement on [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) and commitments by governments to achieving these.

The [2015 UN Climate Change Conference](#), achieved the [Paris Agreement](#), which sets establishes a commitment to keep global temperature rise under 1.5° C and includes all the major carbon emitting countries and most of the minor carbon-emitting countries.

The [2016 UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants](#) achieved the [New York Declaration](#) which establishes global cooperation to address the causes of the refugee crisis and respond to the humanitarian needs of refugees. This has assisted incredibly in management of the refugee crisis in Europe and around the world.

Effective civil society action:

In all three issues mentioned above, competitive national interests that were detrimental to the common good were overcome through effective cooperation and campaigning by civil society.

In order to ensure that the *2018 UN High Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament* (UNHLC) has similar success, we need to build effective cooperation and campaigning from the range of civil society networks that are engaged in nuclear risk-reduction, non-proliferation and disarmament.

So far, there has been very little dialogue within or between these networks about the 2018 UNHLC. And there has not been any significant development of campaign strategy and plans to ensure success of the conference. UNFOLD ZERO is taking the initiative to start this dialogue, strategy development and campaign planning.

Cooperation between nuclear arms control and disarmament communities

Cooperation between the nuclear arms control and disarmament communities will be vital to ensure success of the UNHLC.

This might appear to be difficult, as traditionally there are big differences between such networks. Some focus primarily on non-proliferation. Others focus primarily on risk-reduction and incremental disarmament measures that can be taken by nuclear-armed States and their allies. And others focus on comprehensive prohibition (such as a nuclear ban treaty) to which only non-nuclear countries have subscribed. At times there has been animosity between these networks as each claims to be the most 'politically realistic'.

However, the beauty of the UNHLC is that it can include promotion of all strands (risk-reduction, incremental measures and stronger prohibition measures) as complementary measures and not in competition with each other. This gives an opening for the arms control and abolitionist networks to work together for a successful conference.

UNHLC Agenda

So far, the agenda of the UNHLC has not been set. The United Nations General Assembly has not yet set the dates for the preparatory meeting of governments to adopt the agenda, and the resolutions on the UNHLC have left the proposed agenda rather vague. This leaves an opening for civil society to influence the agenda.

It will be important to set an agenda that is significant in terms of impact on nuclear weapons policies, but also realistic. Of course, both of these aspects will be influenced by how well civil society networks campaign to elevate the UNHLC in governments, parliaments, media, public consciousness etc... This reinforces the need for civil society to start campaigning soon.

A forward looking agenda could, for example, include the following:

- Provide a forum for non-nuclear States to announce their ratification of the nuclear prohibition treaty which will most likely be negotiated in 2017-2018, thus providing an opportunity to promote this treaty;
- Adopt a declaration affirming the sole purpose of nuclear weapons to deter other nuclear weapons, or a declaration by all nuclear armed and allied States affirming no-first-use as a policy;
- Agreement to request the UN to convene a conference for the establishment of a Middle East Zone free from nuclear weapons and other WMD (rather than waiting for the 2010 NPT review conference to do this);
- Adopt a framework agreement (or political declaration), endorsed by the nuclear-armed States, on a phased program to reduce nuclear stockpiles, prohibit the use of nuclear weapons and setting achievable benchmarks for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

Other processes – ban treaty, NPT, NPR....

There are a number of important nuclear risk-reduction, non-proliferation and disarmament processes in 2017. These include, *inter alia*, the resumption of the NPT Review Cycle (with the first preparatory meeting in Vienna for the 2020 NPT Review Conference), commencement of multilateral negotiations on a nuclear prohibition treaty (which probably only non-nuclear States will join) and the United States Nuclear Posture Review.

The nuclear prohibition treaty negotiations might be able to complete their negotiations and adopt the treaty in 2017. If not, they will likely extend the negotiations into 2018 and adopt it then. The NPR could take up to two years from President Trump's inauguration to complete (President Obama took just over two years to complete his NPR). The NPT Review Cycle will not reach any decisions until 2020. The UNHLC can influence, or complement these and other nuclear disarmament processes.

The nuclear-armed States (and some arms control groups) discount, and attempt to discredit, comprehensive prohibition initiatives (such as the ban treaty) as diversions from the real business of step-by-step measures for nuclear disarmament. Similarly, some non-nuclear countries (and some abolitionist organisations) discount and attempt to discredit incremental measures by the nuclear-armed States and their allies, arguing that they are diversions from the 'real' measure for nuclear disarmament which is an immediate and comprehensive ban.

In order to ensure success of the UNHLC, we must avoid these extreme positions, and the notion that work in one area or forum is a diversion from work in other areas or forums. Indeed, preparation for the UNHLC can proceed alongside the NPT prep conference, ban treaty negotiations, US nuclear posture review and other initiatives – and can incorporate and build upon these in the 2018 conference.

Consensus or voting

Multilateral agreements can be adopted either by consensus or by majority vote of those participating in the international conference.

The Conference on Disarmament is required to operate by consensus. Although it has succeeded in negotiating a number of agreements including the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the consensus rule has resulted in no disarmament agreements being adopted in the past 20 years.

The NPT Review Conferences generally work by consensus. Sometimes they are able to reach agreement on key decisions and final documents – such as in 1995, 2000 and 2010, but other times they are unable to do so. In addition, the consensus practice can be used by nuclear-armed States to 'water-down' the nuclear disarmament proposals resulting in rather weak agreements.

The 2017 UN conference to negotiate a nuclear prohibition treaty will operate by UN General Assembly rules, which will allow for a vote on the negotiated treaty. This can allow for the adoption of a strong treaty, but will most likely mean that it will only be adopted by non-nuclear States.

The 2018 UNHLC will also operate on UN General Assembly rules, but could adopt a mixed approach with some decisions adopted by consensus and others by a vote.

Consultations for the UNHLC

UNFOLD ZERO will hold consultations with civil society networks, think tanks, governments, parliamentarians and others on the UNHLC. These will include consultation meetings in Vienna, Geneva, New York and Washington in January 2017. UNFOLD ZERO welcomes feedback on the UNHLC and proposals for the agenda etc... at any time.

Current government support for the UNHLC

UN Resolution A/C.1/71/L.64, the most recent resolution on the UNHLC, was adopted in the UNGA First Committee on 27 October by a vote of 143 in favour, 28 against and 15 abstentions. This includes support from some of the nuclear-armed States, and the vote count is stronger than the resolutions establishing the prohibition treaty negotiations (123 in support) and the one supporting negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention (137 in favour).

However, support is not universal. Some nuclear-armed and allied countries oppose or abstain on the resolution. Although they are still likely to participate in the UNHLC - as they have done for the High Level Plenaries on Nuclear Disarmament held annually on September 26 - their willingness to adopt anything significant at the UNHLC is currently rather low. Civil society will need to elevate the importance of the UNHLC in these states especially, and ensure their participation in the UNHLC Preparatory Meeting (dates not yet agreed) in good faith.

Civil society platform, coordination and promotion

UNFOLD ZERO will provide a web platform, and social media promotion for the UNHLC. We will also establish a framework for civil society coordination for the UNHLC, the nature of which will emerge from the January consultations.

UNFOLD ZERO

UNFOLD ZERO is a platform for promoting UN initiatives to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world. We aim to unfold the path to zero nuclear weapons through effective steps and measures facilitated by the UN General Assembly, UN Security Council, UN Secretary-General and other UN bodies. UNFOLD ZERO was established by Aotearoa Lawyers for Peace (the New Zealand affiliate of the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms), Basel Peace Office, Global Security Institute, Mayors for Peace 2020 Vision Campaign, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, and PragueVision Institute for Sustainable Security. UNFOLD ZERO is hosted by PNND and the Basel Peace Office, and works in close cooperation with the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs and the NGO committees on peace and disarmament (New York, Geneva and Vienna).

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