

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Adopted at United Nations Conference in New York

The first ever multilateral legally-binding instrument for nuclear disarmament to have been negotiated in 20 years was adopted by Member States (a vote of 122 in favor to one against (Netherlands), with one abstention (Singapore)) at a United Nations conference in New York, on 7 July, 2017. The treaty prohibits a full range of nuclear-weapon-related activities, such as undertaking to develop, test, produce, manufacture, acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, as well as the use or threat of use of these weapons. The treaty will be open for signature to all States at UN Headquarters in New York on 20 September 2017, and enter into force 90 days after it has been ratified by at least 50 countries.

However, a number of countries stayed out of the negotiations, including the United States, Russia, India, China, Pakistan, and other nuclear-weapon States. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) did not join the talks either.

Nuclear weapons are the most dangerous weapons on earth. One can destroy a whole city, potentially killing millions, and jeopardizing the natural environment and lives of future generations through its long-term catastrophic effects. They have also almost completely altered many of the existing concepts under international law relating to use of force and warfare. Although nuclear weapons have only been used twice in warfare—in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945—about 22,000 reportedly remain in our world today and there have been over 2,000 nuclear tests conducted to date. Disarmament is the best protection against such dangers, but achieving this goal has been a tremendously difficult challenge.

The United Nations has sought to eliminate such weapons ever since its establishment, and a Commission as well as a number of multilateral treaties have been established and concluded, respectively, to that effect. These include the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests In The Atmosphere, In Outer Space And Under Water, also known as the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was signed in 1996 but has yet to enter into force.

It is interesting to note here that the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which was opened for signature in 1968, had entered into force in 1970, and enjoys a wide membership. The treaty which was to remain effective for a period of 25 years was extended indefinitely and without conditions in 1995 by a consensus vote of 174 countries at the United Nations headquarters in New York City. However, the treaty has often been termed as unequal and as containing loop holes that may allow Member States to acquire nuclear weapons technology, as well as enabling an easy withdrawal procedure.

The new treaty has been described by many as an expression of the deep concern about the enormous risks posed by nuclear weapons and the growing frustration with the failure of the nuclear-armed States to fulfill their nuclear disarmament commitments.

The new accord is comprehensive and would outlaw nuclear weapons use, threat of use, testing, development, production, possession, transfer and stationing in a different country. For nuclear-armed nations that choose to join, the treaty outlines a process for destroying stockpiles and enforcing the countries' promise to remain free of nuclear weapons.