

# The case for abolition

**To protect humanity from the catastrophic, irreversible harm that nuclear weapons are designed to inflict, governments must work with urgency to eliminate them.**

Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons have already been dismantled in response to calls from people everywhere for abolition. One country, South Africa, has eliminated its nuclear weapons completely; dozens of others have abandoned plans to acquire them.

At the height of the Cold War, there were around 70,000 nuclear weapons, with major reductions in the global stockpile achieved from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s.

More recently, however, programmes for warhead dismantlement have ground to a halt, and some nuclear-armed nations are now expanding their arsenals at unprecedented rates. Not one of them has outlined a plan for total disarmament.

But the vast majority of the world's nations remain strongly opposed to nuclear weapons and want them abolished without delay.

It is not enough just to stop the spread of these weapons to more nations, or to place limits on the circumstances in which they might be used. Given the gravity of the threat they pose to all life on our planet, abolition is the only answer.

## **Immoral, illegal and undemocratic**

Nuclear weapons inflict death and destruction on a massive scale, and threaten the very survival of humanity. The indiscriminate killing and maiming of hundreds of thousands of people can never be morally justified.

Any use of nuclear weapons would breach international law and constitute a war crime of the highest order. Weapons with catastrophic effects can never serve a legitimate military or strategic purpose.

All around the world, including in nuclear-armed nations, opinion polls indicate strong public support for abolition. Governments that continue to develop nuclear arsenals are acting contrary to the will – and best interests – of their citizens.

Everyone, everywhere stands to benefit from the elimination of these most horrific weapons.

## **Nuclear deterrence**

Nuclear-armed nations often invoke the theory of “nuclear deterrence” to justify maintaining nuclear arsenals. They argue that their weapons are solely for the purpose of deterring other nations from initiating a nuclear attack, and as such contribute to peace and stability.

Most nations, however, reject that logic and view nuclear deterrence as a dangerous, misguided and unsustainable approach to security. Moreover, it is inherently aggressive, as it relies on a constant, credible threat to inflict death and destruction on a large scale.

Contrary to the claims of deterrence proponents, the existence of nuclear weapons in the world has not prevented conflicts, including acts of aggression against nuclear-armed nations. In fact, nuclear weapons have made wars and confrontations more likely by exacerbating tensions and enabling coercion and blackmail.

Deterrence theory suggests that nuclear weapons are a legitimate and desirable source of security. This encourages proliferation and impedes disarmament.

## **The growing risk of use**

The risk of a nuclear weapon being used today, whether by accident or design, is as high as it has ever been – and only appears to be increasing.

This is due to factors such as the dire international security environment, heightened tensions among nuclear-armed nations, the build-up of their nuclear forces, and the erosion of international norms and institutions.

The pursuit of offensive cyber-capabilities, autonomous technologies and artificial intelligence in the military domain makes the threat even greater.

Maintaining nuclear weapons on high alert – ready for use within minutes of a warning of an incoming attack – is a particularly dangerous practice. Once a nuclear-tipped missile has been launched, it cannot be recalled. It must proceed to its target, even if the launch was based on false information.

In the fog of war, leaders are prone to acting irrationally and unpredictably. The potential for misunderstandings is especially great in stressful, chaotic situations.

It is all too easy to foresee how a moment of panic or ruthlessness, a bruised ego or miscommunication, could lead to global catastrophe, as the vast power to unleash nuclear devastation is vested in just a few individuals.

On multiple occasions during the Cold War, the world came perilously close to experiencing a full-scale nuclear war. The most infamous incident was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 involving the United States and the Soviet Union.

The fact that nuclear weapons have not been used in conflict since 1945 has more to do with good luck than good management. And sooner or later, our luck will run out – unless effective action is taken to eliminate this menace.

## Accidents and errors

There is not only a risk of the deliberate use of nuclear weapons; they could also be detonated as a result of human error, technical malfunction, cyber-attack, misinterpreted warnings or unauthorised access to command and control systems.

The numerous accidents involving nuclear weapons since 1945, as well as incidents where they were almost used due to errors, demonstrate the alarming potential for unintended disaster.

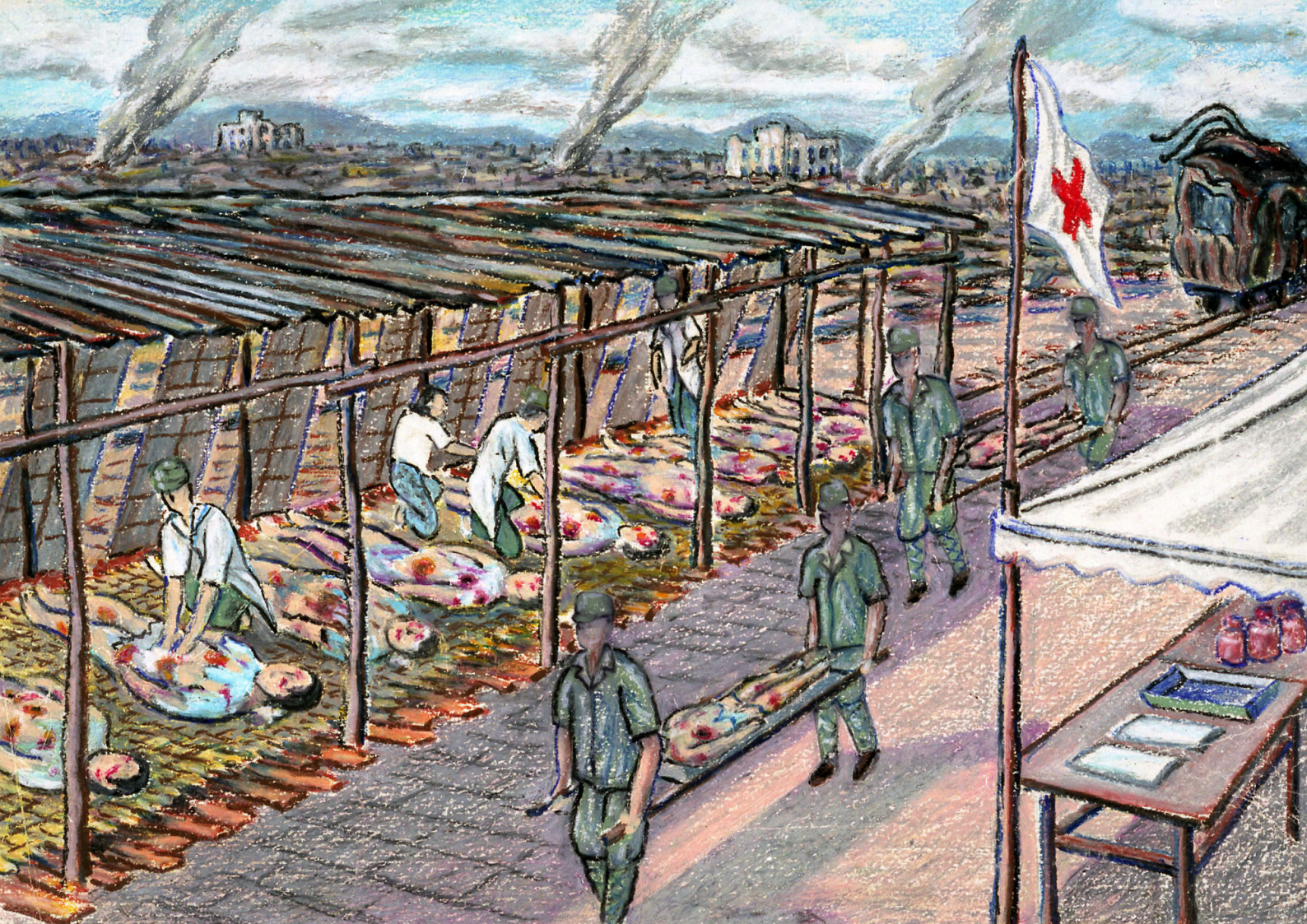
In 1968, for example, a US aircraft carrying four nuclear bombs caught fire and crashed near Greenland, contaminating the surrounding area with plutonium. Luckily, though explosions did occur, no nuclear chain reaction was triggered.

In 1995, Russian officials mistook the launch of a Norwegian scientific rocket for a US submarine-launched ballistic missile. The Russian president retrieved the launch codes for a retaliatory strike but ultimately determined that it was a false alarm.

Other deeply troubling incidents have involved the loss of nuclear weapons at sea, nuclear-armed submarines colliding, flying swans and light reflected off clouds being mistaken for nuclear-tipped missiles, and the inadvertent insertion of training tapes into an operational computer, which simulated an incoming nuclear attack.



In 1961, two nuclear bombs fell to the ground in the US state of North Carolina when a bomber lost a wing. "By the slightest margin of chance, literally the failure of two wires to cross, a nuclear explosion was averted," said Robert McNamara, the US secretary of defence at the time. Credit: US government



A Hiroshima survivor's depiction of a relief station in 1945. The wounded died one after another.  
Credit: Fumiko Yamaoka

## No humanitarian response

The use of even a single nuclear weapon anywhere in the world would overwhelm health infrastructure, making an effective humanitarian response impossible.

Hospitals and pharmacies, fire-fighting equipment, communications and transportation systems would all lie in rubble throughout a zone of complete destruction extending for kilometres.

Those attempting to provide relief to the sick and wounded would be exposed to high levels of radioactivity, risking their own lives.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has repeatedly warned that there is no adequate response capacity in the event of the use of a single nuclear weapon, let alone a full-scale nuclear war, and no such capacity could ever be developed.

Similarly, the World Health Organisation has concluded: "Whatever remained of the medical services in the world could not alleviate the disaster in any significant way."

## Can bunkers help?

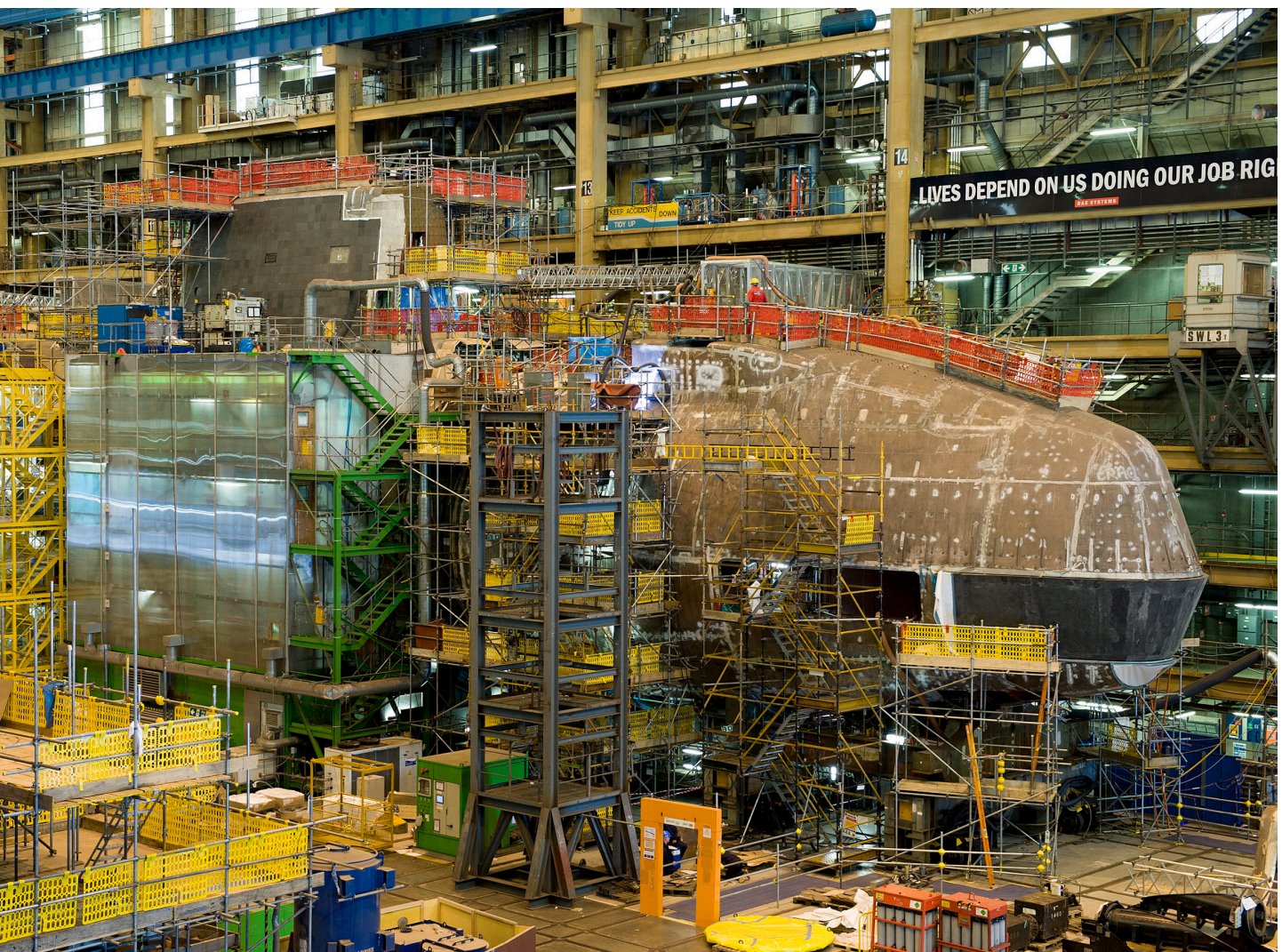
Building more nuclear bunkers, or fallout shelters, is not the solution. Popular during the Cold War, they give citizens a false sense of security about the survivability of nuclear war.

In the event of a nuclear attack, it is unlikely that anyone would receive advance warning, so there would be no opportunity to seek cover.

Furthermore, many of the bunkers close to ground zero would become furnaces, killing everyone inside. Indeed, some nuclear weapons are specifically designed to penetrate deep into the earth to destroy bunkers.

Those who did manage to find a bunker in time and survive inside would face a dangerous, radioactive hellscape upon exiting, with slim chances of being rescued.

A nuclear-armed submarine under construction in the United Kingdom. Credit: UK government



## **A waste of resources**

Each year, nuclear-armed nations spend many billions of dollars enhancing and expanding their nuclear forces – money that could be invested in health care, education, poverty alleviation and action to address the climate crisis.

In some nations, corporations reap large profits from supporting the development and production of nuclear weapons. Think-tanks and universities are also involved and benefit financially.

Ending this life-endangering work would free up resources for other purposes and allow some of the brightest scientific minds to contribute to a more peaceful world – rather than perfecting their militaries' ability to kill and destroy on a massive scale.

## **A barrier to peace**

Nuclear weapons do nothing to address any of today's security challenges. On the contrary, they make many of them worse or are their main cause.

Achieving abolition would allow for more harmonious relations among nations and create opportunities for greater international cooperation, benefiting people everywhere – including, not least of all, in nations currently armed with nuclear weapons.

It would be a global public good of the highest order, serving both national and collective security interests.

## **Gender critique**

Leaders who express a willingness to use nuclear weapons are often lauded as masculine, strong and decisive, whereas those who support disarmament are dismissed as feminine, weak and emotional.

Furthermore, public debates and decision-making about nuclear weapons tend to be dominated by men.

Actively challenging these notions and ensuring greater gender diversity and inclusion would improve the prospects for success in disarmament.



An Artists Against the Bomb installation. Credit: Miki Anagrus