



A ban on nuclear weapons

In 2017, following a decade of advocacy by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) and its partners, 122 nations voted to adopt a landmark treaty to outlaw the world's worst weapons, known as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). It entered into force in 2021.

Before that point, nuclear weapons were the only weapons of mass destruction not subject to a comprehensive, globally applicable ban. Thus, the new treaty filled a major gap in international law.

It was born out of deep concern at the growing threat that nuclear weapons pose to human survival, the environment, socio-economic development, the global economy, food security, and the health and welfare of current and future generations.

It is not only the first multilateral treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons outright, but also the first to establish frameworks for verifiably eliminating nuclear weapons and for assisting victims of their use and testing.

Though no nuclear-armed nation has joined the TPNW to date, it remains an indispensable tool for strengthening the global taboo against the use of nuclear weapons and spurring long-overdue action for disarmament.

History has shown that the prohibition of certain types of weapons facilitates progress towards their elimination. Weapons that have been outlawed are increasingly seen as illegitimate, losing their political status and, along with it, the resources for their production.

As more and more nations join the TPNW over time, its norms will grow stronger, and the pressure on nuclear-armed nations to conform to them will intensify. To date, over half of the world's nations have joined the treaty.

It offers a powerful alternative to a world in which threats to inflict mass destruction are allowed to prevail. It presents a pathway forward at a time of alarming crisis.

Main provisions of the TPNW

Prohibitions

The TPNW prohibits nations from ever developing, testing, producing, acquiring, stockpiling, transferring, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons. They are also banned from hosting another nation's nuclear weapons on their territory, or assisting or encouraging others to engage in activities proscribed by the treaty.

Framework for elimination

The treaty establishes a legal framework for the verifiable and irreversible elimination of nuclear weapon programmes and associated facilities. A nuclear-armed nation that joins it must remove its nuclear weapons from operational status immediately and destroy them in accordance with a negotiated, time-bound plan, within a deadline of up to 10 years. Alternatively, a nation can destroy its nuclear weapons before joining the treaty and have this verified by a designated international authority.

Victim assistance and environmental remediation

The treaty requires nations to assist victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons, including with medical care, rehabilitation and psychological support. They must also take measures towards remediating areas contaminated with radiation from nuclear explosions. International cooperation is key to the effective implementation of these provisions.

Building on other treaties

The TPNW reinforces earlier treaties relating to nuclear weapons, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, which aims to limit the number of nations possessing nuclear weapons and advance the goal of disarmament.

As affirmed by the International Court of Justice in 1996, nations have a legal obligation “to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament”. The lack of progress towards this end was a major motivation for the negotiation of the TPNW.

Other complementary treaties include the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty of 1996 and regional treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

The TPNW is based on a body of law known as international humanitarian law, which limits the methods and means of warfare. Parties to an armed conflict must refrain from using weapons incapable of distinguishing between civilians and combatants, or those that inflict superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.

Banned weapons



Biological weapons
– banned in 1972



Cluster munitions
– banned in 2008



Chemical weapons
– banned in 1993



Nuclear weapons
– banned in 2017



Anti-personnel mines
– banned in 1997



A meeting of parties to the TPNW in New York in 2025. Credit: ICAN

Bringing more nations on board

Any nation may join the TPNW at any time. Those that are currently reluctant to do so might reassess their positions as the treaty's membership grows larger and the demands of their citizens grow louder.

This has been the case in the past for other treaties. France and China, for example, opposed the Non-Proliferation Treaty when it was negotiated but felt compelled to join it decades later.

The world is rapidly changing, and today's leaders will not remain in power forever. Future governments might accept the merits of the treaty where current governments do not.

Nations that have joined the TPNW are required to encourage others to come on board, with the ultimate goal of "universal adherence".

Joining the treaty sends a clear message that nuclear weapons are unacceptable and must be abolished. At a time of increasing nuclear dangers, it offers the best hope for eliminating the worst weapons.

“Let us seize now the unique opportunities brought to us by this treaty and bring the era of nuclear weapons to an end.”

– International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020

Disarmers: South Africa and Kazakhstan

Two leading proponents of the TPNW, South Africa and Kazakhstan, have shown through past actions that nuclear disarmament is possible.

When Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than 1,400 nuclear weapons remained on its territory. It opted to relinquish them all, recognising that its security was best achieved through disarmament.

South Africa reached the same conclusion at the end of the Apartheid era in the early 1990s, voluntarily dismantling its entire arsenal of nuclear bombs – an act later verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Leaders from both nations have expressed great pride in their contributions to achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world, urging others to follow suit.



Casings for South Africa’s nuclear bombs.

“The entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in January 2021 was an extraordinary achievement and a step towards the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.”

– António Guterres, UN secretary-general, 2021



A high-level signing ceremony for the TPNW in 2017. Credit: UN Photo