ICAN opening statement
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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

Let me begin by thanking the Department of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa and the International Committee of the Red Cross for co-hosting this Seminar with ICAN, as well as each of you [the participants] for travelling here to tackle one of the most pressing challenges of our time: the elimination of nuclear weapons.

We are meeting at a particularly worrying time. War is raging in Ukraine and tensions among nuclear-armed states are extraordinarily high. For the first time in many years, we are faced with the very real and deeply concerning possibility of a nuclear weapon being used in conflict.

In 1945, it took just two atomic bombs – small by today’s standards – to obliterate the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing more than a quarter of a million people. We must do everything in our power to prevent such an atrocity from ever being committed again.

One week ago, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the minute hand of its Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds to midnight: a sobering wake-up call to humanity. The world is teetering on the brink of catastrophe, and urgent action is needed for peace and disarmament.

It is unacceptable that nine countries continue to possess close to 13,000 nuclear weapons between them, threatening every country’s security. No one is immune to the devastating harm that these most horrific weapons could unleash at any moment.

If even a single nuclear weapon were used today, the dead and injured would number in the hundreds of thousands, possibly the millions, and the consequences would be felt well beyond the war zone in which the weapon is detonated.

Radiation, silent and invisible, would cross national boundaries. Millions would flee the area of impact, seeking haven in other countries. Humanitarian organisations would be powerless to respond in any meaningful way to the horrifying aftermath of the attack.

Even more alarming, other nuclear-armed states might opt to use their own nuclear forces in response, resulting in a nuclear exchange with a death toll orders of magnitude greater. Soot from the burning cities would block the sun’s rays, leading to widespread agricultural collapse and famine.
This is the stark reality of what nuclear weapons can do, and are designed to do. Thousands are poised for use at any moment – in missile silos, on submarines, on bombers – at around a hundred locations. The only way to prevent their use is to eliminate them.

A moment of international crisis like the present one can be a moment for action, and it must be – action to rid the world of this menace once and for all and build lasting peace among nations. We must urgently end the arms race and start a race for disarmament.

Six years ago, the international community took a major step in this direction by adopting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, or TPNW. One hundred and twenty-two states supported the adoption, including 42 states in Africa.

Just last week, we celebrated the second anniversary of the treaty’s entry into force. It will not get rid of all nuclear weapons overnight. It cannot produce miracles. But it is our best hope of eventually eliminating the worst weapons.

African states are rightly proud of the role they played in the TPNW’s negotiation and adoption. Support for the treaty in this region is universal, even if much work remains to be done to bring all states on board as parties.

All 54 African states that are UN member states have expressed their support for the TPNW, either by voting to adopt it in 2017 or by voting in favour of an annual UN General Assembly resolution calling for the treaty to be universalised.

I commend the 15 African states that have already signed and ratified the TPNW. Your principled leadership serves as an inspiration to others. ICAN looks forward to working with you to promote universal adherence to the treaty, as required by Article 12.

I also commend the 18 African states that have signed the TPNW as a first step towards becoming states parties, including most recently Djibouti, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, and Sierra Leone. I encourage these 18 states to complete their ratification processes as speedily as possible.

To the remaining 21 states in Africa, I hope that you will see the great merit in pursuing signature and ratification of this important treaty with urgency.

Each new signature and ratification makes the TPNW stronger. It strengthens the global norm against the use and possession of nuclear weapons, contributing to international peace and security. It makes nuclear war less likely.

I also convey my thanks and appreciation to the many civil society organisations in Africa, including those that are ICAN partners, that are working tirelessly to raise public awareness of the TPNW and promote its universalisation.
At the first Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW held in Vienna last June, the states parties resolved to pursue universalisation as a priority. They pledged not to rest “until the last state has joined the treaty, the last warhead has been dismantled and destroyed, and nuclear weapons have been totally eliminated from the Earth”.

The dates of the second Meeting of States Parties have been set for November this year, in New York. If your country is not yet a state party, I would encourage you to make every effort to ensure that it is a state party in time for this important meeting.

We must not allow the nuclear-armed states to continue wielding, for decades to come, what Nelson Mandel once described as “terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction”.

They are not entitled to do so and never have been. On the contrary, they are legally obligated to pursue negotiations in good faith for nuclear disarmament and have failed to fulfil that requirement, undermining everyone’s security.

As more and more states join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, those states that still cling to these despicable weapons will feel more and more pressure to live up to their legal obligations and conform to the new international norm.

Peace can never be achieved through the ever-present threat of mutual annihilation. It is beyond time that the so-called “Great Powers” of the world moved beyond this Cold War mentality and the deeply flawed concept of deterrence.

There is nothing great or clever or strategic about threatening to obliterate cities. In fact, to quote Setsuko Thurlow, a survivor of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima: “The development of nuclear weapons signifies not a country’s elevation to greatness, but its descent to the darkest depths of depravity.”

An international system where a small handful of states can wield Earth-endangering weapons – while occupying permanent seats at the UN Security Council and dictating to others what to do and not to do – is manifestly unjust. It is what the late Desmond Tutu once called “nuclear apartheid”.

As he wrote in 2011, “We must not tolerate a system of nuclear apartheid in which it is considered legitimate for some states to possess nuclear arms but patently unacceptable for others to seek to acquire them. Such a double standard is no basis for peace and security in the world.”

The TPNW brings an end to this double standard. It fills a gap in international law. It applies the same rules to all states, regardless of their size and “status” in world affairs. It promises not only a more peaceful future, but also a fairer one.
Let me thank you once again for joining us here in Pretoria. I look forward to our discussions over the coming two days and to celebrating further signatures and ratifications of the TPNW over the coming months.