

The Campaign to Ban Nuclear Weapons

By [Lesley Docksey](#)

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

For some years an international campaign has been gradually building – [ICAN](#), the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. The goal is a treaty banning nuclear weapons, a Convention such as the Landmine Convention and the Cluster Munitions Convention. It will follow the same process, and requires enough nations, supported by their citizens, to sign up to it, bring it into being and then to ratify it. Once ratified, the development, possession and use of nuclear weapons becomes illegal. The beauty of this approach is that it sidesteps the bogged-down Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in which states that have undertaken to get rid of their remaining nuclear weapons endlessly argue about ‘process’ with the aim of hanging on to their horrifically destructive toys.

Three in four states support negotiations for such a Treaty. So, overwhelmingly, does the public. In March this year Oslo hosted an intergovernmental [conference](#) on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons with ICAN acting as the civil society partner, engaging with delegates and helping to inform their thinking. While there, ICAN also held a Civil Society Forum. A total of 127 states took part. Such are the humanitarian dangers of nuclear weapons that it became clear that no nation has the resources to cope with the effects of even one of these weapons being used. By the end of the conference attending states wanted a follow-up conference which Mexico has agreed to host next year.

Unsurprisingly, the big 5 – US, UK, Russia, China and France – refused to take part, making some ill-judged statements about how the conference would upset NPT negotiations. There was, of course, a lot of behind-the-scenes pressure on governments not to take part.

[Article 36](#), following a Freedom of Information request, finally received copies of documents showing the process of the British Government’s thinking about this important conference. As expected, the Government doesn’t look good. This is the [report](#) from Article 36.

Documents suggest UK boycott of key nuclear weapons meeting was driven by P5 partners

by Article 36

Internal documents on the UK Government’s decision making around whether or not to attend a major meeting on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons make it clear that the UK followed others into an ill-judged position.

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 15 January 2013 10:37
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Subject: FW: Submission: Oslo Conference on nuclear weapons and the Open Ended Working Group on multilateral nuclear disarmament

Mr Burt was grateful for this submission.

Many thanks

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Comment [LJ3]: s27(1)(d) International Relations - this information relates to the promotions or protection by the UK of its interests abroad.

Earlier this year, the UK Government decided to boycott a [conference in Oslo on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons](#) (4-5 March 2013). Their boycott was undertaken together with the other four nuclear-armed states that sit as the permanent five (P5) members of the UN Security Council.

The Humanitarian Conference was a distinct success that saw 127 governments, along with international organisations, UN agencies and a focused and well organised NGO community under the umbrella of [ICAN](#) come together for a fact-based discussion on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon use. [The Chair's summary](#) highlighted the key points of agreement, and noted that follow up meetings would be held.

Internal documents on the UK's decision making around attendance are revealing. They show no engagement with the actual subject matter of the meeting and express anxiety on behalf of officials that the UK might not be able to make itself look like a leader in that context. However, they do suggest that the UK was willing to attend and only decided not to after following the lead provided by the rest of the P5. Having been led into that decision, the UK then adopted a line of strong rejection of the conference. This in turn will make it difficult for the UK to participate in any subsequent meetings of the humanitarian impact track without engaging in a major climb down.

Failure to engage with the content

The Humanitarian Conference was structured around scientific and technical discussions of the different types of impact a nuclear weapon detonation would have, and the challenges such effects would have for any kind of humanitarian response. Whilst UK ministers claim to ["fully understand the consequences of any use of nuclear weapons"](#), by boycotting the conference they effectively chose not to share this understanding with the wider international community.

Unfortunately, whilst the UK's National Security Risk Assessment includes a projection "of harm to people; the economy and infrastructure and territory as well as restrictions on our freedom to act in UK national interests and psychological impacts" from the use of nuclear weapons by both state and non-state groups, ["the precise details of the](#)

[assessment, and the evidence it draws upon, remain classified for national security reasons.](#)” In reply to a question asking what assessment the government has made “of the effect on the distribution and availability of blood services in the event of a nuclear weapons being exploded in or near a UK city with a population of more than 500,000” the answer was complacent reassurance: [“as with any type of major incident, the Department and the national health service have plans in place to be able to respond effectively to minimise harm to the UK population arising from accidental or malicious use of radiological material.”](#)

Yet tellingly, when asked in Parliament what assessment the UK had made of the conference’s conclusion that “it is unlikely that any state or international body could address the immediate humanitarian emergency caused by a nuclear weapon detonation in an adequate manner and provide sufficient assistance to this affected”, [the government spokesperson avoided the question](#). Clearly the UK is unwilling to explicitly admit that it agrees with this statement – but is also unwilling to start claiming it could provide an adequate response.

Worried about looking good

Overall, the UK’s responses to questions in parliament on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and their internal discussions about participation in the conference, suggest virtually no consideration being given to the actual subject matter of the meeting.

It would be disingenuous to assert that the Humanitarian Conference was only about technical content. There were of course political discussions in Oslo about what might be done in response to the humanitarian challenges being assessed – yet these were generally conversations for the margins, or engaged with in open or general terms.

Yet the UK’s internal and public explanations for its eventual decision not to attend are focused on concern that the UK would not be able to pass itself off as a leader in nuclear disarmament and anxieties about international political processes.

Internally, in planning communications between London and Oslo on 22 January 2013, a UK official wrote that [“we feel that the focus and format of the conference will not lend itself to the UK setting out our narrative and key messages around our forward leaning approach to multilateral disarmament.”](#) So the concern here is really about whether or not the UK will look good in the meeting.

However, at this point the UK is still considering participation. Whilst any kind of substantive engagement with the content of the meeting seems to be off the table, officials are making arrangements with the embassy in Oslo to provide a level of attendance if required. Although the redactions in the document make it difficult to be clear, it is very significant that the UK was itself open to participation. The sections redacted in the emails of 14 and 15 January are explained as relating to ‘international relations’ – which may be linked to a persistent rumour that the French were particularly desperate for a collective P5 boycott of the meeting.

Yet a few weeks later, after a collective decision has been made by the P5 not to attend, [the UK produces its more public facing explanations for that decision](#). These are not of course fear that the UK will not be able to make itself look good but rather a list

of ways in which the meeting threatens the whole apparatus of international disarmament discussions. Most notably:

“The UK is concerned that the Oslo Conference will be an unhelpful diversion from the pursuit of progress on multilateral nuclear disarmament through [the] existing fora and that it represents a potential challenge to the current consensus-based step-by-step approach to multilateral nuclear disarmament. The UK is concerned too that some states and NGOs may seek to use the Conference as a vehicle to push for ambitious disarmament measures that the UK does not support, that cannot succeed, and that may risk undermining the consensus-based step-by-step approach.”

This broad line then provided the basis for the explanation of the UK boycott given by UK government ministers to Parliament. [However, in a statement to the Conference on Disarmament given whilst the Oslo meeting was taking place, the UK adopted an even more aggressive tone:](#)

“We are concerned that the Oslo event will divert attention and discussion away from what has been proven to be the most effective means of reducing nuclear dangers – a practical, step-by-step approach that includes all those who hold nuclear weapons. Only in this way could we realistically achieve a world without nuclear weapons. ... We are half way through the [Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT)]’s five-year cycle but some appear already to have abandoned the Action Plan, convening alternative processes which will divide the international community.”

Asserting that the Humanitarian Conference was a “diversion” whilst the meeting was in progress and [looking in detail at the horrific humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon effects](#) was a bad mistake of tone and appeared callous and disconnected. Notwithstanding the logical challenge of claiming something to have been “proven to be the most effective” when a) it has not been effective and b) little else has been tried, this statement also positively accused the Humanitarian Conference of being contradictory to the NPT and representing an “alternative process” – both of which were wide of the mark for anyone actually participating. It is noticeable that the UK’s concerns are all based on determination to keep debate on nuclear weapons within frameworks over which the UK and certain other nuclear armed states can effectively exert a veto – thereby ensuring against outcomes that would highlight too explicitly the obvious contradiction between their determination to keep and indeed modernise their nuclear weapons whilst claiming to be working for a world without them.

Failure of political strategy

By refusing to engage at all with the content of the Humanitarian Conference, by boycotting the meeting, and then by being so strident in expressing opposition to the meeting, the UK actually contributed to building up a sense of the Oslo conference as a significant political moment. Whilst the P5 like to think that nothing significant can be done on nuclear weapons without their participation, [there is growing consideration of how non-nuclear armed states can come together to change the rules regarding these weapons](#) – the absence of the P5, en bloc, from the Humanitarian Conference served greatly to strengthen that dynamic.

Due to pressure to take a collective position with the P5 the UK seems to have shifted

from grudging openness towards participation to aggressive dismissal. As a result the UK has chosen a course of action that will effectively alienate it from what is likely to be the most important stream of discussions in nuclear disarmament in recent times. Whilst the UK Government has [expressed in parliament its willingness to consider attendance at the meeting in Mexico in early 2014](#) that will be the next step from Oslo, in reality this will be politically painful. Having spoken out so aggressively against the initial meeting, coming to Mexico would clearly represent a major climb down by the UK. Yet staying away will allow the partnership of empowered non-nuclear armed states to grow stronger, the goal of a treaty banning nuclear weapons to become still more distinct, and the emergence of a process towards that goal still more likely.

So there you have it. Basically put, nuclear weapons are good for P5 egos. And they are both angry and scared that the rest of the world might find a way of emptying their box of toys. Whatever nationality you are, spread the news about ICAN. Sign the petition. The more people sign up, the more their governments will know they have civil society's mandate to create a Convention Against Nuclear Weapons.

<http://www.article36.org/cat2-nuclear-weapons/documents-suggest-uk-boycott-of-key-nuclear-weapons-meeting-was-driven-by-p5-partners/>

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