BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Realizing the promise of the Ban Treaty will take a global movement—but much of the work needs to be done right here in the United States.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons could find itself shoved to the back of a high shelf, its aspirations seemingly out of reach, like the Nonproliferation Treaty. Or it could become a living, breathing mandate, its power vested in the actions of people around the world who collaborate to compel nuclear weapons states to abandon the homicidal policies of deterrence and mutually assured destruction.

It is not an understatement to say that the future of life on the planet may hinge on which of those scenarios comes true.

With that in mind, OREPA has been working with many colleagues to build on the hundreds of actions that happened across the country on January 22 of this year, the day the Ban Treaty entered into force, to turn that historic moment into an enduring movement.

Here’s how it’s going.

WORKING GROUPS FORMED

Following January 22, we (OREPA, The Nuclear Resister, and Nukewatch) convened two more national zooms at which we floated the idea of establishing Working Groups to focus on specific strategies to elevate the Ban Treaty and use it to educate, organize and mobilize people.

Within a few weeks, seven Working Groups were up and running—well, okay, maybe taking a few tentative steps toward organizing the collaborative effort. Each Working Group selected a person to serve on a Coordinating Committee that meets monthly to share reports and, hopefully, coordinate the work in ways that amplify the efforts of the individual Working Groups.

It doesn’t sound exciting—getting organized rarely is.

But the work itself is interesting, and the promise it holds is even exciting.

GAME CHANGER

The power of the Ban Treaty was baked into it more than a decade ago when the first small group gathered in the South Pacific and hatched a plan to take on nuclear weapons in a new way. Rather than argue policy or debate military strategy, they determined to focus on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons.

They listened to the voices of the hibakusha who had survived Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the voices of downwinders who had been subject to nuclear testing and its contamination and fallout.

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They began to expand their reach, eventually forming the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), now a Nobel Peace Prize winning collaboration of more than 600 groups around the world.

Several international conferences later, that movement came to the United Nations, where, in 2017, one hundred twenty-two courageous nations, resisting pressure from the nuclear weapons states, voted to approve the Treaty.

Throughout, the focus remained on what counts—not the projection of obscene military power by nine nuclear-armed states, not the false security of thousands of weapons that, if ever used, would not provide safety but, instead, on the billions of people, along with all creatures great and small who would be wiped out by the bombs.

This is the promise of the Ban Treaty—it views nuclear weapons through the humanitarian impact lens—it tells the truth about the Bombs, a truth that is the same for everyone on the planet, nuclear-armed or not. As ICAN’s Beatrice Fihn says, “Either we get rid of the bombs, or they will get rid of us.”

SEVEN WAYS TO GET THERE

Back to our Working Groups. Each of the seven Working Groups has been tracking down resources, sharing experiences, and developing plans. Some are building databases to pull together stories and experiences from across the country, putting all the information in a single document that can be accessed and searched.

Others are working with resources that already exist and calling on ICAN organizers who are zooming with us from Europe. And all of the Working Groups are talking about expanding their reach by getting more people involved.

The Working Groups are:

- Schools of Mass Destruction, focusing on universities and colleges across the country that are supporting nuclear weapons production, including the University of Tennessee;
- Days of Action, preparing resources and messaging and making plans for specific times that the TPNW can be elevated;
- Localities and Legislators, working to get cities/towns/villages and elected officials at all levels to pledge to support the Treaty and to refuse to be part of weapons production;
- Faith Communities, drawing people from various faith communities together to strategize on ways to bring the Ban Treaty to life in congregations and communities;
- Divestment, sharing information on strategies to hit nuclear weapons in the pocketbook, looking at corporations and financial institutions that are invested in the production of weapons of mass production, exploring alternatives for personal financial actions, and working to develop campaigns for divestment;
- Policy/Advocacy, looking at opportunities to address nuclear weapons production in Washington, DC—tracking budget work and looking at key legislation. Several bills are before Congress already, including Eleanor Holmes-Norton’s bill (HR 2850) calling for the US to sign and ratify the Ban Treaty;
- Affected Communities, bringing the voices of those affected by nuclear weapons use and testing into the conversation—calling for the Ban Treaty’s positive obligations require that health and environmental impacts be addressed.

GET INVOLVED

Who me? Yes, you.

You don’t have to have experience to get involved—you just have to have interest and a desire to collaborate to make a difference. Each of the Working Groups communicates via a listserv and meets monthly via zoom. If you are interested in joining a Working Group, you can contact OREPA at orep@earthlink.net and we will make sure you are connected.

One caveat—these are Working Groups, not Lurking Groups. It takes time and energy to set up zooms, manage agendas, make plans and carry them out. In the days to come, we will be looking to broaden involvement even further.

OREPA is committed to devoting time and energy to build on the great moral power of the Ban Treaty; it is the best chance we have had in decades to revitalize the abolition movement and draw in new people.

If it sounds like something you want to be part of, you can join a Working Group. Let us know; email orep@earthlink.net with the subject: Working Group.
In the predawn hours of Friday, August 6, 2021, the reading will begin, with each name read, the deep peal of the bell will roll out across the grounds of the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The Names and Remembrance Ceremony takes on special significance here. Y-12 produced the highly enriched uranium fuel for the Little Boy bomb that took those lives in Hiroshima, Japan—some 60,000 in the space of seconds, and another 60,000 in the days, weeks, and months to come.

Each name read is accompanied by the tolling of the bell and the tying of a peace crane on the fence erected across from the main entrance to the bomb plant. The Hiroshima Peace Declaration will be read, along with the accounts of hibakusha, survivors who witnessed the bomb, and statements by US military leaders—General Eisenhower and Admiral Leahy, who argued against using the bomb, saying it was not necessary to end the war.

Two hours into the ceremony, silence falls—

“Humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist. Today, I want you to feel in this hall the presence of all who perished in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”
- Setsuko Thurlow

Nobel acceptance speech

at 8:15am, marking the time of day the bomb detonated in the air over Hiroshima, the bright light followed by the thunderous noise and the searing blast that caused ceramic tile to bubble and human beings to evaporate.

You are welcome to come to be part of the Names and Remembrance Ceremony. It is a solemn event, beginning at 6:00am and ending at 9:00am.

NEVER AGAIN

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the voices of hibakusha, and the future will be the focus of a rally, march and action for nuclear disarmament on Saturday, August 7 in Oak Ridge.

The gathering at Alvin K. Bissell Park will begin at 10:00am, with a program slated to start at 10:30, and a walk to the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex timed to get us to the bomb plant around 12:30. There, we will have a brief program and action for disarmament.

PEACE LANTERNS REMEMBER NAGASAKI

On the evening of Saturday, August 7, we will gather at 8:00pm at the west end of Sequoyah Hills Park, just off the parking lot at the far west end of Cherokee Boulevard in Knoxville, for a Peace Lantern Ceremony marking the destruction of Nagasaki on August 9.

The Peace Lantern Ceremony has proven to be popular with children, so we have set the schedule to avoid having the ceremony on a school night.

We are still developing the elements of the ceremony. Details of the weekend will be posted at www.orepa.org as they are settled.
It’s about the money…
Biden budget seeks increase for nuclear weapons

If you were hoping the Biden Administration would cut into the National Nuclear Security Administration’s ambitious plans to modernize the entire nuclear weapons complex, design and build new nuclear warheads, and force NNSA instead to address high risk contamination threats at nuclear weapons sites, well, as we say in the south, “Bless your little heart.”

The Biden budget, released in the last week of May, carries on the plan to commit trillions of dollars to new nuclear bomb plants and new nuclear weapons. In the last year of the Trump Administration, the NNSA’s Administrator defied the Secretary of Energy and got a huge 25% boost in nuclear weapons spending — despite NNSA having a reported backlog of $8 billion unspent from past years.

In meetings with Senate and House staff, and at least one Senator, we asked them not to accept that bloated 2021 budget as the new baseline for spending. They said they would be taking “a hard look” at that. We’ll see. The NNSA budget sent to Congress seeks a $139 million increase in funding for nukes bringing the total for weapons activities to $15.5 billion.

IT ADDS UP

At almost the exact same time, the Congressional Budget Office released its estimate of the cost of nuclear modernization over the next decade. The numbers are stunning. The CBO estimate is updated every two years, looking ten years into the future. Over the last six years, the ten-year cost of nuclear weapons has more than doubled, from $315 billion in 2015 to $634 billion in 2021.

While most of the spending will take place in the Department of Defense, the NNSA’s weapons programs are projected to top $140 billion between now and 2030, a 25% increase over the 2019 estimate.

The $140 billion will be spent, according to the CBO, on new bomb plants for plutonium pits at Los Alamos and Savannah River, for highly enriched uranium secondaries in Oak Ridge, for upgrades to tritium, uranium and lithium facilities, and for modernizing the Kansas City electronics plant.

NOT SO FAST

Not everyone is happy to go along with the weaponeers’ Congressional shakedown. Senator Ed Markey and Representative Earl Blumenauer have introduced the SANE Act (Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures).

Unfortunately, the SANE Act’s ambitions are modest, to say the least. It might be described as a light tap on the brake rather than an effort to actually bring the spending to a halt. Markey and Blumenauer would cut $73 Billion from the budget over ten years. Just over 4% of the proposed $1.7 Trillion in expected spending.

The good news is the SANE Act would significantly constrain NNSA bomb plans — it would cancel several new weapons systems and warheads — the air-launched cruise missile, a new generation of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, the submarine-launched cruise missile, and the new W-93 warhead.

The SANE Act would also cut NNSA’s plutonium pit production goal from 80/year to 30/year, wiping out the need for a new plutonium bomb plant at Savannah River in South Carolina.

REALITY CHECK

The Markey/Blumenauer legislation, if left to stand on its own, will not be enacted. Nevertheless, it does provide a vehicle for advocates of cuts in the nuclear weapons budget to contact their Senators and Representatives, to have a conversation that forces them at least to think, even if only for a moment, about the cost and threats of nuclear weapons.

The legislation also may influence the budget in smaller ways. It seems highly unlikely that multiple new weapons systems will all be shelved, but it’s not impossible that one or even two can be slowed down long enough for a reconsideration. This is especially crucial while the Biden Administration is preparing its Nuclear Posture Review — a document that could reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defense posture and obviate the need for new weapons systems that will not be available for decades to come.

Whether any of that happens or not could depend on us. The voices of the weaponeers — at the labs and bomb plants, and the contractors who reap billions every year — are loud in the ears of appropriators in Congress. We can’t speak with dollar bills, but we can make sure we are heard in the offices of our Representative and Senators with letters, emails and phone calls.

You can ask your representatives in Congress to co-sponsor the SANE Act, and encourage them to talk to the staff in Markey or Blumenauer’s offices.
Mounting Danger, Multiplying Risks

Like pre-2020 epidemiologists, OREPA has been sounding the alarm for more than a decade about the catastrophe that will occur when one of the aging Oak Ridge bomb facilities fails.

So it was more terrifying than gratifying to read that the Administrator of NNSA testified before then-Senator Lamar Alexander’s committee in 2018 that “NNSA’s infrastructure is in a brittle state that requires significant and sustained investments over the coming decade to correct. There is no margin for further delay…”

At that moment, OREPA’s lawsuit was in federal court, arguing that NNSA’s plan was unsafe and had not been thoroughly studied. NNSA told the court that we were wrong, no further studies were needed, they had it under control.

We won the lawsuit, but it didn’t change NNSA’s plans, and it didn’t make the buildings in Oak Ridge safer.

THE UPF WAS THE ANSWER

Once upon a time, the Uranium Processing Facility Bomb Plant was supposed to replace all the old, unsafe, deteriorating buildings for $1.5 billion. But when the pricetag ballooned to $19 billion, plans changed. The UPF would now replace only Building 9212. Other work would continue in unsafe, old buildings for decades.

It was only through our lawsuit that we learned the perilous deficiencies of that plan. But Tennessee Senator Alexander knew in 2018. And his committee sat on their hands. No significant additional funding to address safety hazards was added to the budget. No action was taken to protect workers or the people of Oak Ridge, Knoxville, and East Tennessee from the risks they face on a daily basis.

IN THE MEANTIME

NNSA’s current policy on worker and public safety is Hope. Hope that a moderate earthquake doesn’t strike East Tennessee (we have small ones on a more-than-monthly basis). Hope that a tornado doesn’t come roaring down Bear Creek Valley to lay waste to Building 9212.

The Hope policy will be in effect for at least three more years for Building 9212, and for thirty more years for other buildings.

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board noted in a letter that DOE’s nuclear policy is “to design, construct, operate, and decommission its nuclear facilities in a manner that ensures adequate protection of workers, the public, and the environment.”

Here is the problem as the Safety Board sees it: “As facilities age, concerns develop over whether DOE can still safely operate and maintain them. Safety structures, systems, and components may degrade and not be able to reliably perform their safety functions.”

HOW LONG?

In meetings last month with the Government Accountability Office, the Safety Board, and staff from key House and Senate committees, we made the pertinent point: “It is crucial that operations be stopped the day before there is a catastrophic failure that leads to worker and public exposures and the loss of control of weapons-grade highly enriched uranium.” And we asked: “How is this being tracked? Who will know when we’ve reached the limit?”

No one had an answer. We asked the Safety Board if they tracked incidents on a spreadsheet so they could see the progression (regression) of deterioration and equipment failure that is documented in separate weekly reports submitted by their resident site inspectors. They do not.

In its letter to the Secretary of Energy, the Safety Board recommended that DOE “develop and implement an approach…that includes a process for identifying and performing infrastructure upgrades that are necessary…”

This recommendation includes an underlying assumption that operations will continue. It fails to contemplate a situation where upgrades may simply not be sufficient to make the facilities safe enough to operate.

ONGOING RISKS

Criticality safety issues appear on almost every weekly Safety Board report at Y-12. Many are due to failures of aging equipment or storage apparatus.

Safety systems also fail routinely—fire suppression system outages; water main breaks, safety valve failures.

Equipment breakdowns happen monthly—the Heavy Gas Furnace one month, the Oxide Conversion facility the next. One entire highly enriched uranium processing operation was moved from Oak Ridge to Nuclear Fuel Services in Erwin, Tennessee, a facility that lacks the high security protections at Y-12.

TIME FOR THE TALK

It is past time for officials responsible for safety, oversight and operations to sit down and develop a plan for the safe shutdown of operations at Y-12 until such time as new, safe, compliant facilities are able to resume operations.

The clock is ticking. Catastrophic failure may not

continued
Did you hear that?

One change brought on by the pandemic, at least for now: You can zoom to meetings around the globe, without ever leaving the house. And you can learn a lot.

Last week I heard the Director of Disarmament and Threat Reduction from the Arms Control Association say, “The question in our view is not whether to modernize, but how much, at what cost, and at what level of acceptable risk...”

It was a classic example of the authorized conversation, when boundaries are set before discussion begins to identify which speakers and ideas will be taken seriously. No talking about the Ban Treaty with the Arms Control Association!

Unimaginable devastation

On another zoom, I heard Princeton's Zia Mann say, “We cannot know the full extent of the nuclear danger. And we cannot imagine the full nature of the devastation of nuclear war.”

Quite a different conversation! Pointing out that only nine countries can start a nuclear war, Mann said, “This is where the danger lives. The political and military institutions in these nine countries are where this danger resides.”

Mann pointed out that while we cannot know the path that might lead to nuclear war, we do know the abolition of nuclear weapons is the only way to eliminate the danger.

He was followed by former Defense Secretary William Perry who opened with: “Today, the danger of nuclear catastrophe is greater than it was during the Cold War, including the Cuban missile crisis.” He went on to say that as a CIA analyst during the Cuban missile crisis, it was his job to look at the pictures. He thought every day as he went back to his hotel that it was likely to be his last day on earth.

Actions matter more

I tuned into an international webinar on the idea of the policy of No First Use, a proposal that seems to grow in popularity even as its futility becomes ever more clear.

A speaker from England quoted a military leader who said: “Capabilities matter more than good intentions.” A diplomat from Russia said almost the same thing: “Words matter. But actions consistent with words increase confidence.” What else could be said during the webinar that could matter at all?

No First Use is currently being pushed as a pledge to be taken by President Biden who fully supports massive funding for new bomb plants, new nuclear missiles, and warheads with a first-strike capability. What rival nation, or ally for that matter, would be foolish enough to believe a pledge belied by actions?

Compounding the danger is the risk that adoption of a No First Use pledge might cause people to relax under the illusion that they were somehow safer, even as thousands of nuclear weapons continue to be deployed on hair-trigger alert.

A Reason to Hope

As disheartening as it is to hear smart people still trapped in Cold War thinking that nuclear weapons are a necessary evil, there is still a reason to hope.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons sees the nuclear threat through a new lens—the impact of nuclear weapons on people and the environment.

In 2017 Ray Acheson of Reaching Critical Will reflected on the process that led more than 100 nations to challenge, despite enormous pressure, the nuclear-armed states and their protectorates:

“The courage that brought states to the room to negotiate this treaty and the collaborative spirit of engaging with non-state actors have both been instrumental to the success of this initiative to ban nuclear weapons.”

Thanks to those strong, brave nations and the global movement driven by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, we now have a Ban Treaty.

What we make of it is up to us.