

“Nuclear weapons have always been immoral. Now they are also illegal.”

Setsuko Thurlow, Hiroshima atomic bomb survivor

On July 7, 2017, a United Nations conference adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Nuclear weapons threaten human survival, the environment, the global economy, food security, and the health and welfare of current and future generations. The treaty challenges this dangerous status quo and points to the end of nuclear weapons.

The TPNW was to take effect ninety days after the “fiftieth instrument of ratification.” On October 24, 2020, the fiftieth country ratified it. And on January 22, 2021, the treaty came into force. This was a momentous step forward toward a world free of nuclear weapons! Prior to the treaty, nuclear weapons had been the only weapons of mass destruction not banned under international law. Now nuclear weapons are prohibited as well.

The TPNW is based on international humanitarian law, which stipulates that the right of warring parties to choose their methods of warfare is limited—including that their weapons must distinguish between civilians and combatants.

The TPNW outlaws a wide range of activities. Countries that join it must never develop, test, produce, acquire, stockpile, transfer, use, or threaten to use nuclear weapons. They are also forbidden from hosting another country’s nuclear weapons on their territory and from assisting or encouraging anyone else to engage in the prohibited activities. And they must address the harm that’s been done to the victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons and remediate the environmental damage.

History has shown that prohibiting certain types of weapons leads to progress on eliminating them—even if not all countries have joined the treaty. The weapons are increasingly seen as illegitimate. They lose their political status and along with it the resources needed to produce them. Arms companies have difficulty acquiring funds.

Major banks and other financial institutions are already divesting from the producers of nuclear weapons—as they want to comply with the TPNW, the new international law.

Work on this historic treaty was led by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (www.icanw.org), which received the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its work.

Many countries are now ratifying the treaty. The United States must follow their lead.

West Seattle Neighbors for Peace and Justice

(Adapted from writings by Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons)