



Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons
Nayarit, Mexico
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Session II: Statement by Ambassador Dell Higginson

The humanitarian consequences of nuclear testing – illustrated very forcibly in today's presentation related to the Soviet testing site of Semipalatinsk – have particular resonance for NZ as well as for our neighbours in the Pacific.

Ours is a region that has seen a series of nuclear detonations carried out in our midst, and we have heard from the Marshall Islands this morning about the effects of this testing on them. New Zealand worked to stop the testing of nuclear weapons in our neighbourhood – including by taking a case against French nuclear testing to the International Court of Justice in 1973 and then again in 1995.

Even today, we remain alert to the consequences for the New Zealand environment of the tests which were carried out in the Pacific. For instance - at some financial cost, and entirely as a result of this testing – New Zealand continues *monthly* radiation testing of NZ milk products in order to be able to reassure our export destinations about NZ's radiation levels. We do similar analysis of rainwater samples on a *weekly* basis.

The nuclear tests in our region took place against the continued insistence of nuclear weapon powers that all their testing was safe – safe for our atmospheric and marine environments, and safe for the health and genetic well-being of our populations.

Today, we know that so much of what we suspected in the 1970s and 1980s was true. Colleagues will, for instance, have seen the report published last month by ICAN (Australia) which includes documentation on the long-term health effects of nuclear testing for some of our near neighbours.

The consequences of testing in our region have been harmful enough. But they would pale into insignificance when compared with the effects of a nuclear weapon detonation - and even more so with the effects of a *regional nuclear conflict* - centred on a heavily populated area. We have listened today to a scenario exploring the devastating effects of an incident taking place in Mexico City.

NZ's Planning Council produced in the late 1980s a case study on the likely effects of a nuclear war on NZ. Its scenario (which was based on the hypothesis of a full-scale northern hemisphere nuclear war) was, no doubt, a product of its Cold War times. But its outline of the huge impact on the environment, agriculture, trading economy, and society - even for a country as remote from its imagined scene of conflict as New Zealand - still makes for relevant, and very sobering, reading. And of course we know now that the consequences of a nuclear conflict or detonation, today, for our societies would be much worse even than in the 1980s given the much greater degree of connectedness and globalisation of all our infrastructure and our communities nowadays.

Some of the research and historical examples cited in our Planning Council study make for interesting reading. For instance, it references the temperature changes which occurred in the northeast of the US, in Canada and in western Europe in the summer of 1816 as a result of the vast dust clouds emitted into the atmosphere by Mount Tambora in Indonesia. One of the consequences of this eruption was to bring about famine in urban France and in Switzerland.

For me, this serves to underline the reality and gravity of the impacts we would face from a 'nuclear winter' – as featured in the panel session we have just now listened to. Just as a volcanic eruption in Asia can have far-reaching effects for distant parts of North America and Europe, we know now that even a limited nuclear exchange or series of detonations would represent a global disaster for all our economies and climate.

We may not be able to prevent the eruption of a Mount Tambora – but it seems senseless to subject our citizens to risks we do not, and should not, have to face: those of a nuclear detonation or of nuclear winter.

[Statement online at <http://www.icanw.org.nz>]