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The Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons: will France go to join the discussions in Vienna?

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To the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs,

On December 8-9 in Vienna more than 150 states will gather for the third Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, on the invitation of the Austrian Government.

This conference is an important step in the process leading to a world without nuclear arms, and this will put the end to the notion that the risks of detonating a nuclear weapons are acceptable - whether it happens deliberately or accidentally, caused by a technical fault, a human error or by somebody's plain madness.

The humanitarian consequences - also the consequences for health, the environment and the economy - of such an explosion, were it to occur, will be catastrophic for decades and will not be contained within national frontiers.

The potential total destruction caused by 16300 nuclear weapons, currently in the arsenals of 9 nations, would take hostage the populations of every other nation.

Confronting this danger, many states - with wide support from civil society, notably those affiliated to the International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Arms (ICAN) - have decided to reposition the "humanitarian dimension" into the heart of the issue of nuclear disarmament, by joining in a series of intergovernmental conferences called "the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons". Norway organised the first in March 2013, with 127 diplomatic delegations present, and Mexico hosted the second conference in February 2014, with 146 delegations participating. Austria's turn will be on 8-9 December this year.

France failed to take part in the first two conferences, describing them as a "diversion" from the approach taken in the Conference on Disarmament. Yet France, the world's third nuclear power in military terms, did take important disarmament steps during the 1990s. At the same time our nation, while recognizing the importance of the issues surrounding the weapons' "humanitarian consequences", continues to carry out a long-term programme for modernising her nuclear weaponry, making decisions that may commit her to it for several decades.

Judging from what the French Ambassador said at the UN on October 8, France will be absent from Vienna also, arguing that the conference follows an "ideological approach" to disarmament, even though such an approach was written into the road-map of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that France adopted in 2010... As in other disarmament processes which resulted in the banning of some forms of conventional arms, France is again choosing an avoidance tactic, one that conceals (badly) her wish to retain at all costs the mastery of the bomb, seen as a dangerous symbol of destructive power.

On 4 September 2013, you denounced the horror of the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian population. You then appealed for people to react, stressing that passivity in the face of these atrocities would be an "encouragement to the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction."

You clearly indicated how dangerous this category of weapons is, a category that includes bacteriological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Yet nuclear weapons are the only part of that category not currently prohibited by a specific international judicial norm, even though they are in essence forbidden by International Law because they are indiscriminate in effect and have disproportionate consequences unjustified by reference to their military objectives.

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For several months now, the involvement of civil society lobbying parliamentarians has made it possible to shake the French taboo about nuclear arms. For the first time since the 5th Republic began in 1960, experts from civil society have been listened to by the Defense Commission; questions have been put to the Government and conferences organised at Parliament. Speeches and debates from politicians of various political stripes have demonstrated that there is not a consensus among French MPs on the role of nuclear weapons in the 21st century. That is new information that cannot be ignored.

On October in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, 155 states adopted a resolution "on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons". This shows that there is a vast international movement against such arms.

Monsieur le Ministre, France must not for a third time ignore an international conference about the impact of these weapons. The objective of the Vienna conference is to improve international security, and so it fits in with France's commitments to contribute to a worldwide process for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The USA, absent from the first two conferences, has just announced the decision to be present in Vienna, thus showing that a nuclear power can change its attitude.

In wagering that a new approach will run out of steam, France would be remaining blinkered to the legitimate aspiration of the world's people to prevent an apocalyptic scenario. Conversely, in agreeing to participate in the intergovernmental discussions and exchanges, France would be demonstrating the full responsibility expected of a major nuclear power.

We call on you, Sir, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, to accept the Austrian invitation.

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(Translation: ACDN)

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