



# DISARMAMENT WEEK: LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR A SAFER WORLD

**As we enter Disarmament Week, we are reminded of a profound truth articulated 15 years ago by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: “*The world is over-armed and peace is under-funded.*” These words still resonate today, reflecting the painful reality that the balance between weapons proliferation and investment in peace remains tragically skewed. This week calls us to rekindle our commitment to disarmament and to envision a future where peace is prioritized over conflict.**

Disarmament Week, observed annually from October 24 to 30, highlights the critical importance of reducing weapons proliferation for global peace and security. This year’s observance gains added significance following the recent Summit of the Future, where world leaders adopted key documents to bolster disarmament efforts. Central to these discussions is UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s new Agenda for Disarmament, which calls for comprehensive strategies to address modern security challenges. This article will explore the relevance of Disarmament Week in light of these developments and the legal frameworks that underpin effective disarmament initiatives.

## **Summit of the Future and the 2030 Agenda**

At the Summit of the Future, held in September 2024 in New York, the critical topic of disarmament was prominently addressed in multiple provisions within the adopted documents. Specifically, Goal 13 emphasized the necessity of ensuring that military expenditure does not undermine investments in sustainable development. Goal 25 reflects a commitment to advancing the vision of a world free from nuclear weapons, while Goal 26 reaffirms the collective determination to uphold existing disarmament obligations and commitments. Together, these goals illustrate the international community’s commitment to aligning security priorities with sustainable development objectives.

Disarmament is crucial to achieving the vision



outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By reducing military expenditures and dismantling nuclear arsenals, nations can reallocate resources to critical areas such as education, health, and infrastructure – key pillars of sustainable development. This reallocation not only supports the immediate needs of communities but also lays the groundwork for long-term economic growth and stability.

Moreover, disarmament plays a significant role in tackling global challenges like climate change. Military operations are typically resource-heavy and can have detrimental effects on the environment. By redirecting funds from military spending to sustainable initiatives, nations can minimize their ecological impact and prioritize investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and climate resilience. This shift is essential for realizing Goal 13, which emphasized the urgent need to address climate change and its consequences.

Furthermore, disarmament aligns with the promotion of human rights and social justice. In a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons and armed conflict, individuals can exercise their rights more fully and participate actively in their communities. Ensuring security through disarmament allows for greater civic engagement and empowers marginalized voices, contributing to the overarching goal of leaving no one behind.

### **The Guterres Disarmament Agenda**

Since the onset of his first mandate, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres has consistently emphasized the critical importance of disarmament. Six years ago, he highlighted in a notable address that military spending was at its highest level since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The current context underscores the gravity of the issue, particularly as the United States allocated billions in military aid to Israel. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has received an unprecedented \$158 billion in military assistance from the United States, making it the largest recipient of such aid in history. In 2024 alone, the U.S. provided \$12.5 billion in military support to Israel. In stark contrast, in 2023, the United States allocated only \$10 billion in total foreign aid to eight countries – Afghanistan, Egypt, Yemen, Ethiopia, Jordan, Somalia, Congo, and Syria – in dire humanitarian need. This disparity underscores the urgent need for a re-evaluation of military expenditures in favour of fostering peace and addressing humanitarian crises.

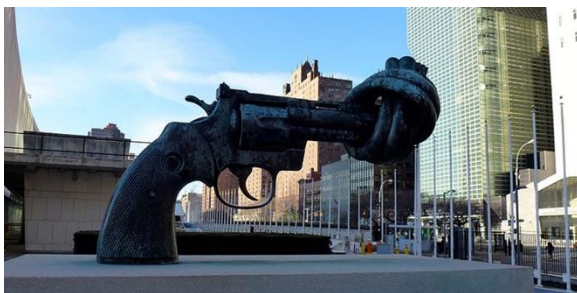
In a more recent address, Guterres articulated his profound concern regarding the fragmentation of global trust, the escalation of arms competition, and the erosion of established disarmament frameworks. He highlighted alarming trends such as the use of explosive devices in populated areas and the emergence of new technologies, including artificial intelligence and autonomous weapon systems. Furthermore, he warned of the potential for an arms race in outer space,



emphasizing the urgent need for collective action to address these escalating challenges.

Guterres's insight reflects a critical call for the international community to reaffirm its commitment to disarmament and to foster dialogue aimed at mitigating these pressing security risks.

In 2018 he introduced “Securing our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament,” envisioning a comprehensive approach to disarmament that promotes sustainable peace and security for all. The Secretary-General emphasized the need for renewed perspectives and cooperation. The Agenda identifies four key pillars: pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons and strengthening norms against other mass destruction weapons; mitigating the humanitarian impacts of conventional arms; ensuring responsible innovation in technology while maintaining human oversight; and revitalizing partnerships for disarmament by engaging regional organizations and promoting the participation of women, youth, and civil society.



**Current Challenges: Nuclear Weapons as a**

### **Primary Concern**

Nuclear weapons remain the foremost concern of world leaders. As geopolitical tensions escalate, there is an increasing apprehension among global populations regarding the potential ramifications of nuclear proliferation. Nine countries possess nuclear weapons: Russia, the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea. Additionally, several NATO member states, including Italy, Türkiye, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, host U.S. nuclear weapons on their territories, reflecting the strategic alliances within the alliance. Furthermore, Belarus serves as a host for Russian nuclear capabilities.

These countries collectively possess approximately 12,100 nuclear warheads, with over 9,500 designated for active military use. Although this represents a considerable reduction from nearly 70,000 warheads held by nuclear-armed states during the Cold War, projections indicate that nuclear arsenals are likely to expand over the next decade. Detonating just 1 nuclear weapon alone over New York would cause an estimated 580 thousand fatalities and jeopardize the natural environment and lives of future generations through its long-term catastrophic effects.

The total elimination of nuclear weapons appears increasingly unlikely, as states possessing the arsenals view them as essential security



guarantees that shield their sovereignty and deter potential aggression. For these nations, the risk of relinquishing such capabilities is perceived too great, as it could invite challenges to their territorial integrity and autonomy. Consequently, nuclear weapons are often regarded not merely as instruments of warfare, but as critical assets in maintaining a strategic balance and asserting national interests.

South Africa stands as the only nation to have developed a nuclear weapons capability and subsequently chosen to relinquish it voluntarily. From the 1940s to the 1990s, the apartheid government pursued research and development in weapons of mass destruction. Initially, in the late 1960s, the South African government, under the National Party, began investigating a nuclear program primarily for infrastructure purposes rather than weaponry. Ultimately, South Africa produced a total of six nuclear weapons. Notably, the United States played a pivotal role by assisting in the construction of South Africa's first nuclear reactors in 1965 and providing highly enriched uranium essential for nuclear arms.

While the official rationale for South Africa's disarmament remains undisclosed, it is plausible that the country believed possessing nuclear weapons would enhance its global significance. In 1991, South Africa took the decisive step of shutting down its nuclear test site and uranium

enrichment facility. This choice was influenced by several key factors:

1. **Transition to democracy:** The end of apartheid ushered in a new political era, prompting a re-evaluation of national and security priorities.
2. **Global advocacy for disarmament:** There was significant international encouragement for disarmament, particularly from proponents of nuclear non-proliferation and the broader global community.
3. **Desire for enhanced international standing:** By voluntarily dismantling its nuclear arsenal, South Africa aimed to strengthen its reputation as a responsible actor on the world stage and reaffirm its commitment to peace.
4. **Economic considerations:** The considerable financial burden associated with maintaining a nuclear program made disarmament an appealing option, allowing resources to be redirected toward pressing domestic needs.
5. **Confidence in security:** South Africa assessed that it could achieve adequate security without reliance on nuclear weapons, bolstered by its conventional military capabilities and international support.

### **Nuclear Testing in the Past**

The grim reality of nuclear testing and the destructive power of these weapons is unfortunately well-documented. The first nuclear test, conducted by the United States, took place on the morning of July 16, 1945, in Alamogordo,



New Mexico. Over the subsequent five decades, more than 2,000 nuclear tests were carried out worldwide. The United States led with 1,032 tests, followed by the Soviet Union with 715. The most recent nuclear test was conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2017.

Notably, approximately 25 % of these tests – over 500 – were conducted in the atmosphere. Physicians estimate that around 2.4 million people worldwide may ultimately face cancers linked to these atmospheric nuclear tests, underscoring the long-lasting health impacts of nuclear weapons beyond their immediate destructive capacity.

Atmospheric and underwater nuclear testing was officially banned by the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, reflecting international efforts to mitigate the dangers associated with nuclear weapons. This treaty marked a significant step toward controlling the proliferation of nuclear arms and protecting global health and safety.



**From Treaties to Tensions: France's Stance on**

### **Disarmament Amid Israeli Actions**

In light of ongoing concerns regarding the humanitarian impact of armed conflict, several multilateral treaties and instruments have been established to regulate, restrict, or eliminate certain weapons. These include the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the Biological and Chemical Weapons Convention, the Anti-Personnel Landmine Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, and the Arms Trade Treaty. Despite these efforts, serious allegations have emerged regarding Israel's use of thermal weapons, commonly referred to as "vacuum bombs." These devices generate extreme heat, resulting in devastating effects on human bodies, raising urgent humanitarian concerns.

International agreements, such as the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, explicitly prohibit the use of such weapons against civilians in populated areas. Additionally, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court categorized the deployment of thermal bombs as a war crime. Reports have surfaced indicating that during military operations along Lebanon's southern border last October, Israeli forces utilized artillery shells containing white phosphorus. Despite international law clearly forbidding such





actions, instances of the production and use of these weapons persist, underscoring the critical need for robust enforcement of existing legal frameworks.

In response to these troubling practices, French President Emmanuel Macron has taken significant diplomatic steps. He recently announced a decision to prohibit Israeli companies from exhibiting their products at an upcoming arms fair in Paris, scheduled for next month. This move is not an isolated action; it aligns with Macron's broader call for an arms embargo on Israel aimed at mitigating the conflict in Gaza. His appeal was primarily directed at the United States, reflecting a desire to address the humanitarian implications of military aid and arms sales.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has openly criticized Macron and other Western leaders who share similar views. Additionally, in June, Paris banned Israeli participation in Eurosatory, one of the world's largest arms fairs focused on land armaments. Although a court later overturned this decision, it came too late for Israeli firms to attend.

The organizers of the Euronaval Salon have confirmed that, following a directive from the French Government, no Israeli stands or exhibitions will be permitted, although delegates from Israel are welcome to attend. While the French government has not provided an official

explanation for this ban, it appears to reflect an intention to contribute to peace efforts and reduce further casualties in Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, and other regions affected by the Israeli military presence. By addressing these complex issues, France is signaling its commitment to upholding international humanitarian law and fostering dialogue aimed at reducing conflict and promoting stability in affected regions.

The Israeli government has responded seriously to President Macron's actions. Israel's Foreign Minister has indicated that the country will pursue legal measures in response to the ban on their participation in the French arms fair. He characterized the boycott as an anti-democratic action that is "unacceptable, particularly between friendly nations." However, he did not provide further details regarding the specific measures being considered.



### **Imagining the Aftermath of Nuclear Warfare**

When discussing nuclear warfare, it is essential to acknowledge the tragic event of August 1945. The United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan: "Little Boy" on Hiroshima on August 6



and “Fat Man” on Nagasaki on August 9. Together, these bombings resulted in the immediate deaths of approximately 220,000 Japanese citizens, with over 200,000 more succumbing later to the effects of lethal radiation exposure. This historical episode serves as a stark reminder of the potential consequences should a nuclear conflict arise.

The fireball from a nuclear explosion reaches its maximum size in approximately 10 seconds. The immediate blast is lethal to individuals near ground zero, while those further away may suffer severe injuries, including lung damage, hearing loss, and internal bleeding. The intensity of thermal radiation is so profound that it can vaporize nearly everything in close proximity to the epicentre.

In the event of a nuclear conflict, the initiation of hostilities by one party would prompt a rapid response from the opposing side, as missile detection systems would facilitate immediate counterstrike. Should a nuclear war commence, it is estimated that within a mere 72 minutes, as many as 5 billion lives could be lost.

In the long term, the aftermath of nuclear weapon usage results in ionizing radiation that poses severe health risks to those exposed. This radiation contaminated the environment and leads to chronic health issues, including cancer and genetic damage, compelling survivors to seek refuge in underground shelters. Moreover, the

detonation of even a small fraction – less than 1 % – of the world’s nuclear arsenal could have devastating effects on the global climate, potentially endangering up to two billion people through a phenomenon known as nuclear famine, where agricultural systems are disrupted.

### **Conclusion**

As we observe Disarmament Week, the urgency to prioritize disarmament in our collective pursuit of peace and security is paramount. The recent Summit of the Future and UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s Agenda for Disarmament highlight the critical need for a comprehensive approach to modern security challenges. By integrating disarmament with sustainable development goals, we reinforce our commitment to global stability and the protection of human rights.

Guterres’s assertion that “disarmament must be brought back to the centre of our common efforts for peace and security” resonates deeply today, as the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict demand our immediate attention. France’s recent actions regarding Israeli participation in arms fairs underscore the complexities of international relations while striving for humanitarian accountability.

To address these challenges, the global community must reaffirm its dedication to existing legal frameworks and advocate for



robust enforcement mechanisms. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, we can aspire to create a safer world, free from the specter of nuclear warfare.

Considering the legacy of previous nuclear tests,

we understand the necessity of prioritizing disarmament as a cornerstone for a just and sustainable future. The dedication of global leaders, along with active involvement from civil society, will be essential in crafting a more secure and peaceful world for future generations.

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