

International Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons

Working Session III: Humanitarian Preparedness and Response

5 March 2013

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The presentations in working sessions I and II have underscored the devastating humanitarian impact that would result from a nuclear weapon detonation, be it deliberate or accidental.

Thankfully, the United Nations (UN) humanitarian response system has not been called upon to respond to the aftermath of such an event. Meeting existing humanitarian needs throughout the world is challenging enough already. We are currently seeking to provide life-saving and other humanitarian assistance to over 51 million people at a cost of close to US\$9 billion.

The international humanitarian system has some experience in responding to nuclear accidents. At the request of the UN Secretary-General, OCHA recently undertook a study to examine ways to strengthen the link between the international system of response to nuclear and radiological incidents and emergencies on the one hand, and the international humanitarian coordination system on the other.

The study did not focus on preparedness and response in the case of a nuclear weapon detonation. This was considered outside the study's scope because of the "unthinkable" magnitude of such a disaster for effective humanitarian response. Nonetheless, it contains important insights into preparedness and response to nuclear emergencies which have some bearing on our discussions today.

The study makes a number of recommendations relating to preparedness measures.

First, the need to develop Standard Operating Procedures for humanitarian first responders working in an area affected by radiological release. These procedures should be set up in coordination with security and health services.

Second, the need to ensure that security training for staff on the rapid or emergency deployment rosters of humanitarian organizations include radiological preparedness, covering both threat assessment and response procedures.

Third, the study calls for the advance preparation by the relevant authorities of so-called "risk and crisis communication drafts" to facilitate the provision of accurate and timely information as soon as possible after the event.

In terms of response, the study emphasizes the importance of the "human dimension" – that is to say the importance of information dissemination to affected communities, de-stigmatisation and the promotion of community-based approaches.

It is apparent also that there is need to strengthen humanitarian coordination in such settings, as well as in relation to chemical and biological events. We see important preparedness initiatives being taken by humanitarian actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme. Coordination among

international actors and with national authorities is essential to strengthen these efforts and avoid duplication and gaps. OCHA remains at the disposal of the humanitarian community to support this coordination.

Relevant though the study's recommendations might be for preparedness and response in the event of a nuclear weapon detonation, as we know from yesterday's presentations, a nuclear detonation will be considerably more devastating and catastrophic than a nuclear accident.

The detonation of a nuclear weapon would present manifold and severe challenges to our ability to prepare and respond in any meaningful way, relative to the magnitude of the event.

First, we should acknowledge from the outset that the humanitarian system is geared towards responding to sudden onset natural disasters and humanitarian crises stemming from conventional armed conflict. It is not geared towards responding to the unprecedented destructive force and radiological impact of a nuclear detonation. Moreover, the international humanitarian system has no prior experience of such an event on which to draw.

Our role is also predicated on supporting the efforts of national authorities. As we just heard, there are important questions as to the extent to which national authorities are able to respond to a nuclear detonation. Moreover, there is the question of what level of national capacity that would remain, post-detonation, and with which we can work.

Second, the extent of our response would be heavily influenced by the unique circumstances of the detonation: whether it is an accidental detonation in peacetime for example, or takes place in the context of armed conflict; whether the initial detonation provokes retaliatory action, what form that action takes, including the possibility of further nuclear strikes, and what humanitarian consequences would result from those actions and where. It is extremely difficult to plan for such scenarios in advance.

Third, there is the question of how we would ensure presence on the ground to implement humanitarian operations without putting our colleagues at unacceptable risk. Connected to this, we need to better understand the sort of specialist training and equipment that humanitarian workers need in order to operate and the level of investment this requires.

Fourth, we must consider how to respond to such an overwhelming and devastating crisis while continuing to meet humanitarian needs in existing crises, some of which may deteriorate depending on their proximity to the detonation of a nuclear weapon.

Fifth, consideration should be given to the willingness and ability of States to meet the potentially very significant costs associated with a response to a weapon detonation – while also maintaining essential support for ongoing humanitarian challenges. As I mentioned, these existing challenges are enormous including in terms of human and financial resources.

These are just some of the challenges we would face. There will of course be others which are equally formidable and even insurmountable.

We should, as the international humanitarian community, continue to consider the extent to which we can respond to a weapon detonation in any meaningful way. Ultimately though, the reality remains that the only sensible course of action is to ensure these weapons are never used.