

Statement by the Pacific Conference of Churches to the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Parliament of Fiji in Support of Fiji's Ratification of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

9th March, 2020

Honourable Chair and members of the Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Parliament of Fiji:

I bring you warm Christian greetings from the Moderator and Deputy Moderator of Pacific Conference of Churches, a fellowship of over 30 churches and 9 national councils of churches from 15 Pacific island countries and territories, representing approximately 80% of the Pacific population. I am joined this morning by Ms. Jennifer Philpot Nissen of the World Council of Churches' Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and Mr. John Cooper, representing the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom.

May I begin by expressing Vinaka vakalevu to the Fijian Government of Fiji and the Parliament of Fiji for the intention to ratify the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. We acknowledge that Fiji has been consistent in its commitment to nuclear disarmament and has already signed the TPNW. Our further thanks for allowing the Pacific Conference of Churches and our colleague from the World Council of Churches to address this committee.

The Pacific Conference of Churches has been calling for a total ban on nuclear weapons since 1975 and has consistently advocated for this, most recently at its 11th General Assembly in 2018.

The spectre of Nuclear Weapons has brought a shadow to our region since the first atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Pacific War or the Pacific Campaign of the Second World War. Radioactive material entered our region as the uranium and plutonium weapons bound for Japan were flown from Tinian Atoll in what is now the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. The radiation covered planes returned to the Pacific.

Since then the people and environment of the Pacific have suffered as the guinea pigs for the proliferation of nuclear weapons. These experiments designed to secure world domination were undertaken by the United States which held 109 tests in the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Johnson Atoll, Alaska and in the open ocean; the United Kingdom/Great Britain which held 21 tests in Australia and Kiribati ; and France which held 340 tests in Maohi Nui/French Polynesia.

To put the impact of these tests in scale – the uranium fuelled atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima had a blast equal to 12-15,000 tons of TNT, destroying five square miles of the city. The subsequent tests in the Pacific in the 50 years following the end of World War 2 from 1946 to 1996 by the

US, UK and France is the equivalent to “9,010 Hiroshima bombs” or between 108 to 135 kilotonnes – 108,000 to 135,000 tonnes of TNT. According to 2017 Nobel peace prize recipient ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons), which has made a written submission to this Standing Committee, nine countries together possess around 15,000 nuclear weapons. The US and Russia maintain roughly 1800 of their nuclear weapons on high-alert status — ready to be launched within minutes of a warning. Most are many times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. A single nuclear warhead detonated on a large city could kill millions of people with the effects persisting for decades.

The failure of the nuclear powers to disarm has heightened the risk of other countries acquiring nuclear weapons. The only guarantee against the spread and use of nuclear weapons is to eliminate them without delay. Although the leaders of some nuclear-armed nations have expressed their vision for a nuclear-weapon-free world, they have failed to develop any detailed plans to eliminate their arsenals and are modernising them. Their impact on the fragile ecology of the region and the health and mental wellbeing of its peoples has been profound and long-lasting. Pacific Islanders continue to experience epidemics of cancers, chronic diseases and congenital abnormalities as a result of the radioactive fallout that blanketed their homes and the vast Pacific Ocean, upon which they depend for their livelihoods.

Despite being the most destructive, inhumane weapons ever invented, nuclear weapons are the only “weapons of mass destruction” that are not yet banned under international law. (Chemical and biological weapons are both banned internationally.)

Who controls nuclear weapons is of no consequence – they are no good for the Pacific, they are no good for the World.

Today, portions of the Pacific stretching from Enewetak in the North to Kiritimati in the Central Region and Moruroa in the East remain not only uninhabitable but gradually leak toxic effluent into an ocean which is the food source of the region and the fishing ground of the world.

Today, three quarters of a century after the Bikini Atoll test by the United States, the people of that once beautiful coral paradise remain displaced or physically scarred.

Servicemen from Fiji, New Zealand and the UK and their descendants battle the illnesses caused by exposure to radiation from hydrogen bomb tests from 1952 to 1958.

And in Maohi Nui – French Polynesia – a quarter of a century after France terminated its nuclear testing programme, the people continue to cry for justice, for compensation, for medical treatment as waste slowly but surely leeches into the sea. Currently there are strong indicators of an imminent

collapse of Morurua Atoll, which will cause the remaining radioactive substances from the French tests to spill into the Pacific Ocean.

Hon. Chair, I urge this committee to listen to hear the cries of our communities who struggle to sing the Lord's song as songs of freedom and justice in their own land. These cries in the Pacific are not only for the people but for the land and sea of which the Pacific people are a part. The Pacific Conference of Churches notes with sadness and indignation that there has been, as yet, no just reparation or compensation for the loss of land, life and for the severe illnesses and deformities caused by nuclear tests in Maohi Nui (French Polynesia); that the untold physical harm and sickness and the displacement – in some cases for 50 years – of the people of the atolls of the Northern Pacific by the USA without any consultation or explanation or reparation; and the failure of the United Kingdom to act justly towards the soldiers and sailors of its former Pacific colonies who took part in nuclear and hydrogen bomb testing in waters of the present-day Kiribati in 1957 and 1958. Many of those men and their descendants have been diseased or debilitated due to the effects of testing.

We firmly believe that God created the world in which we live as a means to sustain mankind – to provide life through water, air food and shelter.

Today we renew that call.

The world must end any possibility of nuclear war; there must be no chance of even one weapon being ever detonated again.

The Pacific must have justice and reparation for its forced role in nuclear testing.

And that justice must take place now.

Hon. Chairman and members of this Standing Committee; only 50 states are required to make the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons legally binding. 35 have ratified this treaty.

In the name of peace, justice and abundant life, please take this small step for Fiji and a giant step closer to a world without nuclear weapons.

May the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you all. Vinaka vakalevu.