A day to demand that the world wake up and avert nuclear doom

Two odd facts. First, the United Nations General Assembly has declared today, September 26, the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.


The Americans/Chinese/Russians/… won’t let it happen. Oh, and we might need nuclear weapons one day. Anyway, hasn’t that been done before?

Well, no, today is a first. Never before in more than almost seven decades of nuclear threat...
has the UN led the world in observing a day dedicated to this goal.

Secondly, in March last year, the Norwegian government hosted the first ever International Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. The first ever.

Surely that must be wrong, you might say. Surely everyone knows about the appalling human consequences of nuclear weapons.

But it turns out that’s not the case. While 127 governments sent delegations, the governments of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – all of which happen to have nuclear weapons – declined to attend.

**Nuclear club makes mockery of disarmament**

This is all very well, these nuclear-armed governments said (and Australia echoed), nuclear war would be a terrible thing. But, they said, focusing on the harm to humans and the impossibility of any serious medical response will only distract attention from the important work on disarmament, which is going so well.

Yet implementation of the legally binding commitment to disarm that the nuclear-armed nations made 44 years ago is nowhere in sight. All of them are still investing massively in retaining indefinitely and modernising their nuclear arsenals. The UN Conference on Disarmament has produced nothing and not even been able to agree on an agenda - for 18 years.

All under control? With 4765 nuclear weapons in the US arsenal? And slightly more in total on the Russian side? And between them 1800 ready to be launched at any moment? Plus Britain, France and China with 200-300 each; and India, Pakistan and Israel with 80-120 each?

With numbers like these we need a lot more action. In fact, we need to dismantle this unstable monster of mass extermination. Now.

**A war too terrible to contemplate**

The Norwegian conference was the first attempt in the 68 years since the first nuclear war to get governments to talk about the obvious: that nuclear war will be catastrophic. Full stop. Not just for the hundreds of thousands or many, many more immediate and lingering victims of blast, fire and radiation. But now proven catastrophic beyond doubt for the planet as a whole.

Smoke from burning cities lofted into the upper atmosphere would encircle the globe; cool, darken and dry the earth for decades; and devastate agriculture. Worldwide famine would result on a scale never witnessed before – affecting billions of people. The grim reality is that nuclear weapons pose the greatest danger that we face of abrupt, catastrophic climate disruption.

The Norwegian government – which some irritated Australian diplomats have been known to refer to as “an NGO with money” – are pretty up-front about what they want. The Oslo conference, a second, larger conference in Mexico earlier this year and a third in Vienna this
December share two aims.

The first is to get governments talking about the effects of nuclear weapons on their citizens beyond the abstract theory and jargon of "deterrence". This is a mantra held over from the Cold War that daily risks annihilation and consigns hope for change to the political freezer.

Look at the evidence of the humanitarian consequences, the Norwegians say. Look at the impossibility of any effective medical response, say the Red Cross. Think about basing policy on the most acute threat we face on evidence rather than wishful thinking and myth, say the Mexicans. Get your public health, emergency service, agriculture and science people thinking about it, not just the military people, say the Austrians.

**Non-nuclear majority must make a stand**

The second aim is to stop the farce of endless pointless stalled disarmament discussions controlled by the nuclear-armed, with no intention of changing behaviour that suits a toxic constellation of vested interests quite well. The real goal needs to be to use the burgeoning global discussion about the catastrophic consequences of next use of nuclear weapons to kick-start a move for a total ban on nuclear weapons.

Like the bans on landmines and cluster munitions, this will need to be led by those not wedded to the weapons. Indeed, it will have to be kicked off against the nuclear-armed shouting no, never, over our dead bodies. The treaty banning nuclear weapons would be signed first by the great majority of the world’s governments that do not possess and do not want nuclear weapons.

While that cannot immediately bind the nuclear-armed, it would constitute a powerful global statement of what is expected, an unequivocal norm of responsible behaviour against which the nuclear powers will have to explain and justify their non-compliance. Like the treaties banning biological and chemical weapons, landmines and cluster munitions, it will change their behaviour, even for those not signed up. It’s the best next step that can be taken now by those who actually want to get rid of nuclear weapons.
President Barack Obama envisions a world without nuclear weapons.

The first International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons is a good day to remind US President Barack Obama of that fine promise he made in Prague in May 2009, that his country would work towards a world free of nuclear weapons. It is a promise on which he has yet to deliver. And it will be a day to remind the Australian government that nuclear-free defence, without the figment of an American nuclear umbrella – which in reality is more a nuclear bulls-eye – would be a good start to the coming Defence White Paper.