
Three threats with different prognoses

OPINIONS

KIRSTEN KJELSBERG OSEN

E-mail: kirsten.osen@medisin.uio.no

Kirsten Kjelsberg Osen, MD, PhD and professor emerita at the Department of Medical Biology, University of Oslo. Former board member, now council member, of Norwegian Physicians against Nuclear Weapons.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

The world is facing three major threats, the most dangerous of which is nuclear deterrence. Fortunately, however, this threat can be eliminated.

The coronavirus pandemic – the acute global crisis that we are currently facing – is set to claim many lives and have a devastating effect on the economy. However, the prospect of a vaccination and/or the ability to develop immunity to the virus gives us reason to believe that humanity will survive [\(1\)](#), just as it has survived earlier pandemics throughout history.

Climate change may be on course to destroy the earth's ecosystems and cause mass death and misery, but we probably still have time to moderate the impact if we are willing to abandon some of our modern day comforts – right now.

The nuclear deterrence policy that is practised by NATO and other nuclear powers requires thousands of nuclear weapons to be ready for launch with a few minutes' warning. If this process is initiated, either deliberately or accidentally, it could wipe out human civilisation and much of the other life on Earth. Even a limited nuclear war using less than 1 % of the current arsenal would, besides catastrophic local damage due to blast wave pressure and thermal radiation, result in stratospheric pollution from fires with subsequent global cooling, crop failure and famine [\(2, 3\)](#). Radioactive fallout would spread across national borders. The radioactive isotopes would be just as invisible as the coronavirus, but in contrast to the virus, we would not be able to develop immunity to them. The long-term effects for survivors would include increased morbidity throughout life [\(4\)](#). According to WHO, no health service would be

able to provide adequate help to the injured, even after detonation of just a single nuclear weapon (5). Fortunately, there is a solution: abolish nuclear weapons.

The solution

To date, only nine states have nuclear weapons. Five of these – the USA, Russia, the UK, France and China – have pledged through the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to abolish nuclear weapons, but unfortunately none of them have complied with their obligations. Four of the countries – India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – have not signed the NPT. The UN has therefore adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which needs to be ratified by 50 states before it can come into effect (6). Thirty-eight states have ratified the TPNW so far. The problem is that the prohibition will only apply to the countries that have ratified the TPNW, and nuclear-armed states and nuclear-dependent states, such as Norway and other NATO member states, do not want to ratify it. The Norwegian government's justification for this is to show solidarity for NATO's nuclear deterrence policy (7).

«According to WHO, no health service would be able to provide adequate help to the injured, even after just a single nuclear explosion»

Apart from the nuclear weapons profiteers, no one has to give up anything for the abolition of nuclear weapons. On the contrary! The huge sums currently being spent on the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons can be redeployed to ease the economic crisis in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic and to counteract further climate change. When the pandemic is over, we must strive to fight the two remaining threats. International cooperation will be pivotal in this work. One of the important goals for Norwegian Physicians against Nuclear Weapons is to get Norway to stand in solidarity with the *populations* in the NATO member states in the fight to scrap nuclear deterrence as a 'security strategy'. The ultimate goal must be to get NATO to unite the nine nuclear-armed states on the multilateral abolition of nuclear weapons.

LITERATURE

1. Munthe LA. Koronaviruset – kryssimmunitet, flokkimmunitet og vaksineutvikling. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen 2020; 140. doi: 10.4045/tidsskr.20.0298. [PubMed][CrossRef]
2. Helfand I. Nuclear famine. Two billion people at risk? Global impacts of limited nuclear war on agriculture, food supplies, and human nutrition. 2nd edition. Malden, MA: International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear

War, 2013. <https://www.ippnw.org/pdf/nuclear-famine-two-billion-at-risk-2013.pdf> Accessed 27.5.2020.

3. Toon OB, Bardeen CG, Robock A et al. Rapidly expanding nuclear arsenals in Pakistan and India portend regional and global catastrophe. *Sci Adv* 2019; 5: eaayS478.

4. Douple EB, Mabuchi K, Cullings HM et al. Long-term radiation-related health effects in a unique human population: lessons learned from the atomic bomb survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep* 2011; 5 (suppl 1): S122–33. [PubMed][CrossRef]

5. Helse- og miljøvirkninger av atomvåpen. Rapport fra WHO's generaldirektør til Den 46. verdenshelseforsamling. Strålevern Rapport 1995:6. Østerås: Statens strålevern, 1995.
https://inis.iaea.org/collection/NCLCollectionStore/_Public/28/007/28007691.pdf Accessed 27.5.2020.

6. ARMS Control Association. The treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons at a glance.
<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclearprohibition> Accessed 27.5.2020.

7. Regjeringen. Utredning om Traktaten om forbud mot kjernevåpen.
https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/utredning_traktat/id2614526/ Accessed 27.5.2020.

Publisert: 11 June 2020. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.20.0370

Received 24.4.2020, accepted 12.5.2020.

Copyright: © Tidsskriftet 2026 Downloaded from tidsskriftet.no 29 March 2026.