

Western States Legal Foundation

Information Brief

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SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

What kind of Weapons of Mass Destruction are the most dangerous?

The answer is clear: nuclear weapons. Chemical and biological weapons, while frightening and capable of killing those affected in a gruesome way, are difficult to use. Their effects are hard to control, and vary greatly depending on terrain and atmospheric conditions. It is difficult to deliver sufficient quantities of chemical or biological weapons to kill thousands of people.

Nuclear weapons, in contrast, are true weapons of mass destruction. A single modern warhead weighing a few hundred pounds can destroy a city in an instant, killing hundreds of thousands of people. There are still enough in the world's arsenals to destroy human civilization in a day. The International Court of Justice, ruling on nuclear weapons threat and use in 1996, emphasized that nuclear weapons are unique among weapons, because of their "destructive capacity, their capacity to cause untold human suffering, and their ability to cause damage for generations to come."

Who do we know for certain has nuclear weapons?

The United States and Russia have by far the largest nuclear arsenals. Each still deploys thousands of weapons capable of destroying any country and killing tens of millions.

The United Kingdom, France, and China each have hundreds of modern nuclear weapons, and long-range missiles to deliver them. All of these countries promised the world decades ago, when they signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, that they would negotiate to get rid of their nuclear arsenals. There are no negotiations in progress today to reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons.

India and Pakistan both tested nuclear weapons in 1998. With their militaries facing each other down across a long border, they are locked in an unpredictable new nuclear arms race.

Israel, the only country in the Middle East with nuclear weapons, is believed to have several hundred nuclear weapons that can be delivered by plane or by missile. In 1991, the Security Council stated that its requirements for the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction "represent steps towards the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery ..."

The C.I.A. has estimated that North Korea may have enough weapons grade nuclear materials for a small number of nuclear weapons. North Korea claims to have conducted a single nuclear test, on October 9, 2006, but it is unclear whether the test was a success. Contrary to media reports, North Korea has not tested successfully any missiles that could carry a nuclear weapon to the United States.

Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Signed at Washington, London, and Moscow July 1, 1968, Entered into force March 5, 1970, **Article VI**

"Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

Iran is accused by the United States of having a nuclear weapons program, but there is little evidence that this is so. Iran claims that it is developing the capacity to enrich uranium only for use in reactors for peaceful purposes, as permitted by Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Although Iran failed to disclose all of its nuclear-related activities in the past, the International Atomic Energy Agency has found no evidence that Iran diverted nuclear materials for weapons purposes, and so far has drawn no conclusions regarding whether Iran has a research program aimed at acquiring nuclear weapons.

Despite U.S. claims in the run up to war in 2003, there is no evidence that Iraq possessed either nuclear weapons or an active nuclear weapons program. With war hanging in the balance, George W. Bush told the public that “we cannot wait for the final proof -- the smoking gun -- that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.” This was a key argument in persuading the U.S. Congress to authorize the war. The main evidence that the U.S. relied on, however, proved to be insubstantial. Documents supposedly showing attempts by Iraq to buy uranium from Niger were forgeries. Aluminum tubes the U.S. claimed were imported for use in uranium enrichment processes were, in the judgment of most independent experts and the International Atomic Energy Agency, inappropriate for such use.

What country is ramping up its efforts to make nuclear weapons more useable?

The United States. Our government is pouring billions of dollars into modernizing its nuclear weapons facilities and looking for new ways to make nuclear weapons more useable in ordinary warfare. With the stated goal of establishing “a nuclear weapons infrastructure responsive to future needs,” the current budget provides increased funding for the “Reliable Replacement Warhead” program, intended to redesign and replace the weapons in the existing stockpile and to assure the capacity to modernize nuclear weapons for many decades to come. Research continues on the effects of nuclear weapons and how they can be used to destroy such targets as underground bunkers and chemical or biological warfare facilities. Existing nuclear-capable missiles and other delivery systems are being upgraded, and such features as increased accuracy may allow the use of lower yield nuclear weapons against some kinds of targets.

What should we be asking the U.S. government to do?

The United States no longer can pursue a policy of blame and punishment as the solution for the growing nuclear weapons proliferation crisis. Until the United States demonstrates that it is willing to take its own treaty obligations seriously, engaging in a multilateral effort to eliminate the most dangerous weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons, the world is likely to grow more dangerous by the day.

In the interests of real national and global security, the United States should reaffirm and make good on its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty commitments without delay. The U.S. should:

Immediately halt all efforts aimed at “improving” the military capabilities of its nuclear arsenal, including research and development aimed at upgrading missiles and other delivery systems.

Halt plans for upgrades to existing weapons production facilities and forgo building new facilities.

Ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and close the Nevada Test Site

Initiate sweeping, verifiable, real reductions in both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and their delivery systems

Together with Russia, take all weapons off hair-trigger alert

Initiate multilateral negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide

“Men for years now have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.” Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” April 3, 1968