

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 17, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St., NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to urge the State Department to participate, at a senior level, in the 2022 Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons Conference in Vienna, Austria on June 20, 2022. The Conference will take place in the shadow of Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine, which has heightened concerns about the use of nuclear weapons in conflict. Active U.S. participation in the Conference will provide an important platform to discuss the current unsettling state of nuclear affairs in the world and demonstrate U.S. leadership in managing the nuclear threat.

In the earliest days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a higher alert level for Russia's strategic nuclear forces. U.S. intelligence officials have not seen that announcement correspond with observable changes in the readiness of Russia's nuclear strategic forces.<sup>1</sup> But Putin's saber-rattling — and Russia's vast arsenal of tactical or “battlefield” nuclear weapons — is a frightening reminder that the conventional war in Ukraine could turn nuclear — whether intentionally, by miscalculation, or even by accident.

Any Russian use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine would be catastrophic. Even their limited use would render large parts of Ukraine uninhabitable. Dangerous levels of radioactivity would likely prevent life-saving assistance from reaching those in need and would ripple globally, destroying for generations Ukraine's status as the world's “breadbasket” due to contamination of its fields of sunflower, maize, and wheat. The use of nuclear weapons would also exacerbate a refugee crisis that has already seen 13 million Ukrainians displaced since the war began.<sup>2</sup>

With Russia's attack in the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant reactors, those devastating consequences nearly came to pass.<sup>3</sup> Had the strike, which likely violated the Geneva Conventions,<sup>4</sup> hit the facility's reactors or spent fuel ponds, it could have precipitated the worst

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Myre, *Stalled and frustrated, Putin will likely 'double down' in the coming weeks, CIA says*, NPR (Mar. 8, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085155440/cia-director-putin-is-angry-and-frustrated-likely-to-double-down>.

<sup>2</sup> *How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?* BBC News (Jun. 15, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>.

<sup>3</sup> Geoff Brumfiel, Tien Le & Meredith Rizzo, *Video analysis reveals Russian attack on Ukrainian nuclear plant veered near disaster*, NPR (Mar. 11, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/11/1085427380/ukraine-nuclear-power-plant-zaporizhzhia>.

<sup>4</sup> Kelsey Davenport, *Russian Attacks Test International Norms*, Arms Control Association (June 2022), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-06/news/russian-attacks-test-international-norms>.

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nuclear disaster since the Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown in 1986. The Chernobyl disaster resulted in an “exclusion zone” around the plant of almost 20 miles, an area that will remain uninhabitable for thousands of years.

The United States knows the catastrophic consequences that flow from the testing, production, and use of nuclear weapons. Following the first and only wartime uses of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nearly two hundred U.S. atmospheric nuclear tests in Nevada and elsewhere exposed U.S. atomic veterans and downwind Americans to harmful radiation, and, eventually, caused the high incidents of cancer.<sup>5</sup> The United States also used the Marshall Islands as a proving ground to test nuclear weapon designs equivalent to the explosive power of 1.6 Hiroshimas every day for twelve years, exposing Marshallese and U.S. veterans to harmful radiation.<sup>6</sup> The 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) created a pathway for eligible American citizens to receive a one-time payment for the harm U.S. nuclear testing caused them during the Cold War arms race. President Biden just signed the RECA Amendments Act of 2021, which ensures that benefits will not lapse for uranium miners and those who developed cancers from atmospheric nuclear testing.<sup>7</sup> Our lived nuclear experience would provide valuable insights at the Conference.

The Conference is expected to hear from advocates for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). We understand the State Department’s concerns with their approach. At a minimum, banning all nuclear weapons would require unique and unprecedented verification measures that have yet to be negotiated in an arms control agreement, and would require each state with nuclear weapons to sign and ratify the TPNW — none of which have done or plan to do. But we should all agree that, as President Obama put it, we should seek the “peace and security of a world without a nuclear weapons,”<sup>8</sup> and that we should take steps that match our rhetorical commitment to disarmament. By attending the Conference and participating in it, we can build support from countries critical of nuclear weapons states for the slow pace of nuclear disarmament, but whose support we need, including to help achieve a successful Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference outcome this August.

For all these reasons, a high-level U.S. presence at the Conference is warranted. Russia’s suggestions that it may use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and its threats to the nonproliferation regime and to international law have upped the nuclear ante. The United States has a — sadly — unique perspective on the human consequences of the production, testing and use of nuclear weapons. We would bring a needed and voice and invaluable insight to the Conference, and

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<sup>5</sup> Scott D. Szymendera, *The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA): Compensation Related to Exposure to Radiation from Atomic Weapons Testing and Uranium Mining*, Congressional Research Service (Jun. 14, 2022), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43956.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Zak, *A ground zero forgotten*, The Washington Post (Nov. 27, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/11/27/a-ground-zero-forgotten/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Remarks, President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered, The White House Office of the Press Secretary (Apr. 5, 2009).

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would show our commitment to playing a leadership role in ensuring that nuclear weapons are never used in warfare again.

Sincerely,



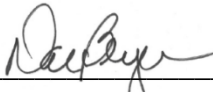
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EDWARD J. MARKEY  
United States Senator  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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JEFFREY A. MERKLEY  
United States Senator  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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DONALD S. BEYER JR.  
Member of Congress  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group



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JOHN GARAMENDI  
Member of Congress  
Co-Chair, NWAC Working Group

Cc: The Honorable Bonnie Jenkins  
Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security  
U.S. Department of State

Cc: Ambassador Adam Scheinman  
Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Nonproliferation  
U.S. Department of State