

Africa and Nuclear Disarmament

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The [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#), adopted in July 2017 by 122 states – i.e. two-thirds of the international community – entered into force on 22 January 2021 after more than 50 countries had ratified it. How did African countries contribute to this achievement and what else should they do?

Among the most important players, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons – the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize laureate – said through its executive director, Beatrice Fihn, that the entry into force of the treaty was “[a new chapter in nuclear disarmament](#)”. Decades of activism have achieved what many deemed impossible: “[nuclear weapons are banned](#)”. The TPNW prohibits the development, testing, possession, transfer, use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. It also obligates its states parties to incorporate into domestic law all prohibitions on their assisting or cooperating with, or financing nuclear weapons-related activities.

As far as African countries are concerned, this historic step should constitute an opportunity for them to confirm and enhance their commitment to prohibiting nuclear weapons as a priority for Africa. Indeed, this is required by the potential catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use for the African continent even if they are used by countries on other continents. As stated in the 2004 [Common African Defence and Security Policy](#) of the African Union (AU), nuclear weapons represent “common threats to Africa's security”.

African countries played a leading role in the negotiation and adoption of the TPNW, which was the first legally binding global instrument to ban nuclear weapons. The principled support of African states for the treaty and their strong and continued commitment to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons are reflected in their adoption, signature and ratification of the TPNW. Of the 193 UN member states, 54 are from Africa (28 per cent); among these, 40 [voted](#) in favour of the TPNW (21 per cent). Of the 86 TPNW [signatories](#), 29 are from Africa (one-third), but of the 52 countries that have ratified the treaty, only seven are in Africa (13 per cent).

African states had already made substantial progress towards nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. With the exception of the newly independent state of South Sudan, all African states are parties to the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), which aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, make progress towards nuclear disarmament, and facilitate the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This is a laudable commitment that complements the continent's pledge to make Africa a completely nuclear-weapons-free zone through the 1996 [Treaty of Pelindaba](#). The only African country to have developed nuclear weapons, South Africa, set the example for the rest of the world by eliminating them.

However, despite these considerable efforts, it is essential that African states expand their efforts and continue to work collectively towards multilateral nuclear disarmament, because the use of nuclear weapons or the conduct of nuclear tests anywhere in the world would have a significant and immediate adverse impact on Africa. Most African states have signed and ratified the [Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#), but three still need to sign it and eight to ratify it.

To date, some [13,410](#) nuclear weapons are held by nine states and approximately two thousand are kept on high alert, ready for use within minutes. Only a short while ago two states possessing nuclear weapons – India and Pakistan – engaged in a brief armed conflict that could have resulted in their using nuclear weapons against each other. Had they done so, the devastating consequences would not have been limited to Asia. Even a limited nuclear war would cause global climate disruption and a catastrophic decline in global food production that would put up to [two billion people at risk of famine](#). Africa would be particularly vulnerable to the effects of a global decline in food production.

On 4 April 2019 the AU's Peace and Security Council adopted a [communiqué](#)

Reaffirming the adoption of the TPNW, recalling the strong support of Member States for the process leading to its development, and *recalling* that the 4th Conference of States Parties to the Treaty of Pelindaba, held on 14-15 March 2018 in Addis Ababa, [had] called upon AU Member States to speedily sign and ratify the TPNW, emphasizing that it advances international law on nuclear disarmament and is consistent with the goals of the Treaty of Pelindaba.

As outlined in the AU's [Roadmap for the Peace and Security Architecture 2016-2020](#), Africa must embark on a common path towards nuclear disarmament, and the leaders of this effort must pressure other states to ratify or accede to the TPNW in order to strengthen its implementation and achieve its universalisation.

The crisis management of a nuclear-weapons disaster is not a realistic option, and reconstruction after such a disaster would be almost impossible. Only steps to prevent the use of nuclear weapons will be effective, and should be defined as a strategic priority. By ensuring the full implementation of the TPNW, we will all be safer. This will put pressure on the nuclear-weapons states and their allies to take more seriously their obligations under international law to end the arms race and achieve nuclear disarmament.

The TPNW strengthens the fight against nuclear proliferation, but also commits the world to achieving greater security by subjecting the most dangerous weapons of mass destruction to a global standard of prohibition. Africa can and must play a central role in this regard to save

humanity and future generations from a nuclear catastrophe. In particular, the potential catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons threaten the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) that the continent is trying to achieve together with the rest of the world.

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