



Calls for new WHO reports on nuclear weapons and health

Countries with long health legacies from nuclear testing are leading calls for new assessments as global nuclear tensions rise. John Zarocostas reports from Geneva.

For more on the **medical consequences of nuclear war** see [Comment Lancet 2023; 402: 431–33](#)

For more on the **number of nuclear weapons** see <https://banmonitor.org/>

For more on **global nuclear weapons spending** see https://www.icanw.org/surge_2023_global_nuclear_weapons_spending

For more on the **impacts of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands on health** see [Comment Lancet 2015; 386: 407–09](#)

For the **Human Rights Council resolution** see <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/57/26>

A group of Pacific island states with painful nuclear legacies, spearheaded by the Marshall Islands, Samoa, and Vanuatu, is behind a diplomatic initiative to renew WHO's mandate to investigate the effects of nuclear war on global health. The move reflects mounting concerns at the prospect of nuclear war and its consequences for humanity and the planet.

The draft proposal, also cosponsored by Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia, Burkina Faso, Peru, Guatemala, Iraq, and Kazakhstan, aims to provide the WHO Director-General with a renewed mandate at the upcoming World Health Assembly (May 19–27). The mandate would enable updated WHO reports on the effects of nuclear war on health and health services (previously published in 1983 and 1987) and the Health and Environmental Effects of Nuclear Weapons report (published in 1993).

Those reports, along with research and advocacy by physicians and scientists, experts note, helped to end the Cold War arms race by educating policy makers and the public about the medical consequences of nuclear war.

Experts say that WHO needs to revamp its once seminal role. With a new nuclear arms race underway, "authoritative current information about the risks and consequences of nuclear war for health has never been more vital. All nations should vote for this resolution", Tilman Ruff, Honorary Principal Fellow, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, told *The Lancet*.

9604 nuclear weapons were available for use at the beginning of 2025, up from 9585 at the beginning of 2024. In 2023, the nine nuclear-armed states spent a combined total of US\$91.4 billion on their arsenals, up

by \$10.8 billion (13.4%) since the year before.

Ruff says that since WHO first examined the effects of nuclear war, "our understanding of the climate, ecosystem, agricultural, and food supply consequences of nuclear war has dramatically improved. What we know about the harm ionising radiation causes to health has deepened. The size, nature, and control of nuclear weapons have changed. Cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and the climate crisis barely featured 40 years ago".

"WHO is mandated to act as the directing and coordinating authority on international health work. Accurate and up-to-date evidence is crucial to making good decisions and policies", he noted. "The long gap in WHO updating our understanding of the effects of nuclear weapons—the greatest acute existential risk to people and the biosphere—simply must be filled."

Alicia Sanders-Zakre, Policy and Research Coordinator at the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, told *The Lancet* that the proposed WHO study "would be a welcome initiative to draw attention to the ongoing and intergenerational impacts of nuclear detonations and could complement the UN General Assembly mandated study on the effects of nuclear, as well as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons [TPNW]", which was adopted by the UN in 2017.

Articles 6 and 7 of the TPNW, she noted, create the first international framework to provide victim assistance and environmental remediation for countries that have been affected by nuclear weapons use and testing. "A study by WHO would be a timely initiative to help countries implement these TPNW provisions and address the

ongoing legacy of harm from nuclear weapons use and testing."

In an address to the UN Human Rights Council on Sept 27, 2024, Hilda Heine, President of the Marshall Islands, stressed the need to raise awareness on the long-lasting generational human rights impacts of nuclear weapons. "We have a collective responsibility to ensure that the human rights challenges and suffering that our people have endured and continue to endure are never again inflicted on others for the sake of these abominable weapons."

Between 1946 and 1958, the Marshall Islands was under a UN Trusteeship, administered by the USA. During this period, Heine explained, the Marshall Islands "was subjected to 67 known nuclear and thermonuclear weapons tests, which poisoned our environment and devastated the health of our people. The Marshallese people were misled, forcibly displaced, and subjected to scientific experimentation without their consent to study the nefarious impacts of human exposure to nuclear radiation". Research on the health effects of nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands found very high doses of ionising radiation to the thyroid, bone marrow, colon, and stomach.

On Oct 10, 2024, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on technical assistance and capacity-building to address the human rights implications of the nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands.

In February, during a session of the WHO Executive Board, North Korea and Russia opposed the Pacific-led initiative. However, with the text now "almost agreed", diplomats are hopeful of securing broad support for adoption at the World Health Assembly.

John Zarocostas