



New Issues, Same Mercy values

Applying Mercy values to today's issues



MELF Research Project 2025

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Abstract

Though Catherine McAuley founded the House of Mercy in the 1800s, Mercy values are timeless. This project aims to use Mercy values to analyse modern issues. These include the use of land mines and nuclear weapons. The impacts of these weapons disproportionately affect the underprivileged. This is the same part of society that Catherine set out to help. While her ministry worked more directly with the poor, her example calls us to address wider structural issues that oppress those who do not have a voice. We are challenged to advocate for and empower them.

This research has produced resources on arms control issues that can be used in the Mercy world to illustrate the applicability of Mercy values to global issues and educate people on them.

“TO RESOLVE TO DO GOOD TODAY BUT BETTER
TOMORROW. LET US TAKE ONE DAY ONLY IN HAND,
AT A TIME”

CATHERINE MCAULEY



Introduction

Catherine McAuley founded the House of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland in the 1820s. She felt called to live her life in service of the poor, the sick and the uneducated, especially women and children. Subsequently the order of the Sisters of Mercy was founded in 1831 to enable her and her companions to continue their work. From these small beginnings Mercy women now work in more than 40 countries worldwide sharing Mercy values around the globe.

The Sisters of Mercy were the first religious Sisters to come to Aotearoa New Zealand arriving in Auckland from Ireland on 9 April 1850. They came in response to a call from wāhine Māori¹. They founded communities, schools and hospitals continuing the work of the Sisters in New Zealand. It is now 175 years since they arrived in New Zealand.

The needs of the community that the Sisters faced in those early days in New Zealand were very similar to those in Dublin. Sadly, 175 years later, some of the issues in our society are the same, with poverty and education still an issue. However, we are also facing issues today that would have been inconceivable to those Sisters when they arrived in New Zealand.

The technological advances of the 20th century have improved the standard of living but also introduced new problems. Military advances have created weapons that impact on civilian populations as well as combatants. For example, nuclear weapons have consequences far beyond the battlefield with vast destructive capacity but also a significant environmental legacy. So too do landmines impact the lives of civilians, especially children, long after the conflicts that they were used in are over.

“WE CARRY OUT THE MISSION OF MERCY GUIDED BY PRAYERFUL CONSIDERATION OF THE NEEDS OF OUR TIME” SISTERS OF MERCY OF THE AMERICAS

Despite how removed these issues are from the initial focus of the work of the Sisters of Mercy, Mercy values can still be applied to the issues we are facing today. Mercy values do not just call us to “feed the hungry” and “welcome the stranger” but to take steps to protect our common home, not just to protect God’s creation but to ensure there is food to feed the hungry and clean water to give the thirsty. Weapons such as landmines threaten our common home. They make land unable to be used for housing or agriculture.

These are not issues that can be tackled solely at the local level as they are global issues. Sometimes it is necessary to work at the structural level to achieve the changes required to make it possible to act at the local level.

¹ Wāhine means women in te reo Māori.

Why Arms Control issues?

Arms control issues as we know them today did not exist when Catherine started her work. The proliferation of weapons that do indiscriminate damage to civilians as well as combatants, such as land mines and nuclear weapons, are a product of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The impacts of these weapons disproportionately affect the poor and vulnerable. Landmines have injured and killed civilians, including children, in Cambodia, Syria and Afghanistan. While nuclear weapons have been responsible for health issues and displacement of indigenous people in the countries they were tested in, including the Marshall Islands and Australia. These are the same people that Catherine set out to help. While her ministry worked more directly with the poor, her example calls to us to address the wider systematic issues that are holding people back from living their full potential.

In many countries there are land mines present that are an active threat to the people living there long after the conflicts in which they were laid have ended. Tens of thousands of people have been injured by these remnants of war. In 2023 alone, over 5,750 casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war were recorded. Of these 84% were civilians, and, where the age group was recorded, 37% were children.

Landmines do not only cost lives and limbs but also prevent communities from accessing land that could be used for farming or building hospitals and schools as well as essential services such as food, water, health care and humanitarian aid.

Nuclear weapons impact people and the environment, both through their use but also throughout the rest of their life cycle. Nuclear weapons have only been used twice in a conflict to horrifying effect. The devastating impact on people and the environment is long lasting and has been well documented.

However, the *manufacture* of nuclear weapons also impacts people's lives and the environment. The mining of uranium can leech radioactive materials into the environment, often leaving mining sites contaminated with hazardous materials. Pollutants from the mining of uranium can contaminate aquatic ecosystems for hundreds of years, threatening downstream communities, fish and wildlife.

There is also the risk of accidents, the risk of attack on nuclear facilities in conflict and the issue of long-term storage of nuclear waste. Nuclear waste remains highly radioactive for tens of thousands of years, and no solution for permanent storage exists. There are a concerning number of examples of mismanagement, accidents, and problems with clean up from nuclear weapons production sites around the world. These risks and issues pose a risk to human life and the environment.

Concerningly, the recent uptick of military activity, particularly the war in Ukraine, has seen an increase in the use of land mines and an increase in spending on modernising nuclear

weapons. Now more than ever, attention needs to be brought to these issues to prevent the future damage they will do to civilian populations and the world we live in.

Mercy values

What has come to be called Mercy values are certain Gospel values that Catherine McAuley chose to guide her life. She shared these with other Mercy Sisters and asked them to use them when making decisions. These values have been passed down through the Mercy tradition to new generations of Mercy women.

Mercy values have been articulated in a number of ways. Here I have used an articulation of the values from Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa, the Sisters of Mercy of New Zealand. I have included the translation of the value in te reo Māori – the language of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand. The Sisters in New Zealand have a special relationship with Māori as they came to New Zealand after a request from a group of wāhine Māori for the Sisters to educate their children.

Aroha Compassion

The Mercy value of compassion is about acting with understanding and sensitivity.

Manaakitanga Hospitality

The Mercy value of hospitality is about welcoming all who come as friends - whether it is someone new or someone you have known for a long time.

Te Tapu o Te Tangata Respect

The Mercy value of respect is about recognising the gifts and talents of the people around you and respecting every person and culture as unique.

Rato/Awhina Service

The Mercy value of service is about helping others and meeting human needs through quality care.

Tika Social Justice

The Mercy value of social justice is about trying to make sure everyone is treated fairly and justly, and working together for the common good of all.

Te aroha ki te rawakore Concern for poor and vulnerable

The Mercy value of concern for the poor and vulnerable involves responding practically to community needs.

Te mana whakahaere Mutual enhancement

The Mercy value of mutual enhancement involves enhancing lives by sharing our gifts.

Corporal and Spiritual works of Mercy

Mercy values have also been articulated as a set of “works” of Mercy. These are split into corporal and spiritual works of Mercy (see Table 1). These can be used to guide Mercy people in their lives.

Table 1: The Corporal and Spiritual works of Mercy

Corporal works of Mercy	Spiritual works of Mercy
Feed the hungry	Instruct the ignorant
Give drink to the thirsty	Counsel the doubtful
Clothe the naked	Admonish the sinner
Welcome the stranger	Bear wrongs patiently
Visit the sick	Forgive offenses willingly
Visit the imprisoned	Comfort the afflicted
Bury the dead	Pray for the living and the dead
Care for our common home	Grateful contemplation of God’s world

“THE SPIRITUAL AND CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY WHICH
DRAW RELIGIOUS FROM A LIFE OF CONTEMPLATION, SO
FAR FROM SEPARATING THEM FROM THE LOVE OF GOD,
UNITE THEM MORE CLOSELY TO HIM AND RENDER THEM
MORE VALUABLE IN HIS HOLY SERVICE.”

CATHERINE MCAULEY



Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons are among the most powerful and destructive weapons ever created. They are classed as weapons of mass destruction because of their ability to destroy cities, vaporising not just buildings but also people.

There are two main types of nuclear weapons: atomic and thermonuclear. The first nuclear weapons were developed during World War II. They were atomic weapons, which get their destructive force from the energy released when a uranium or plutonium atom is split in a process called fission. This releases the equivalent energy to thousands of tonnes of TNT (measured in kilotonnes or kT). For example, the nuclear weapon used at Hiroshima was a 15 kT weapon – that is the equivalent of 15 thousand tonnes of TNT.

During the Cold War, thermonuclear weapons, sometimes referred to as Hydrogen-bombs, were developed. They use nuclear fusion, the energy released when two atoms are fused together. They are the most destructive weapons ever created, hundreds to thousands of times more powerful than an atomic bomb (in the order of 1,000 kTs). The largest nuclear weapon developed was the Tsar Bomba developed by the Soviet Union, which had a yield of 50,000 kT.

When a nuclear weapon detonates there are three main effects: the destruction caused by the explosion, the radiation and possible fallout. The explosion sends shockwaves across the landscape, flattening buildings, igniting fires and killing or severely injuring anyone in its path. This is an indiscriminate weapon which kills civilians.

Exposure to the radiation released from a nuclear weapon has long term impacts that include serious health issues for people who are exposed, environmental damage, and geopolitical ramifications. It can cause acute radiation sickness, with symptoms ranging from nausea and vomiting to organ failure and death. Radiation exposure also increases the risk of cancer and genetic mutations in the long term.

The “fallout” from a nuclear weapon is the radioactive particles that are carried by wind currents after an explosion. Fallout can contaminate large areas, poisoning water supplies, soil, and air. The effects of fallout can last for decades, causing long-term health issues, environmental degradation, and economic disruption.

Use

Only two nuclear weapons have ever been used in a conflict, one on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and another on Nagasaki on August 9. In Hiroshima, of a civilian population of 250,000 it was estimated that 45,000 died on the first day and a further 19,000 during the subsequent four months. In Nagasaki, out of 174,000, on the first day 22,000 died and another 17,000 within four months. Survivors, known as Hibakusha, endured physical effects that lasted for the rest of their lives.

Unrecorded deaths of military personnel and foreign workers may have added considerably to these figures. About 15 square kilometres (over 50%) of the two cities was destroyed.

The devastation caused by these weapons was unparalleled.

At the time the US decided to use these weapons the full extent of the damage they would cause was unknown. However, now we know. To continue to make these weapons, store them in large quantities and have them ready for use is to disregard the inherent value of human life. These weapons do not discriminate between victims. The devastating impact on both human life and the environment is unjust. Mercy calls for us to care for our neighbour, especially the vulnerable, and care for our common home. Nuclear weapons are a threat to all.

Nuclear testing

While only two nuclear weapons have ever been used in a conflict, more than 2,000 have been tested during countries' development of nuclear weapons. This has had a significant impact on the environment around the testing sites and the health of those living nearby.

These tests often were undertaken in the colonies or territories the nuclear weapon states had at the time. For example, the UK tested nuclear weapons in Australia and the Pacific, the US tested them in the Marshall Islands, the Soviet Union tested them in what is now Kazakhstan, and France tested them in French Polynesia.

This meant that the people who lived in the vicinity of the testing sites were often unable to hold those in power to account. They were vulnerable and should have been protected by the countries' responsible for them.

Often the indigenous people near the testing sites were exposed. As were some service people, both intentionally to determine the effects of exposure but also during the clean up afterwards. This has led to decades of health issues for those exposed and long campaigns by victims for acknowledgement of the harm done.

Additionally, land was contaminated during the tests. While there have been attempts to clean up the sites, many are still unsafe for people. For example, the people who lived on Bikini, Rongelap and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands were forcibly displaced during the US nuclear tests. They are unable to return to their homes. They used to live off the land but now they do not have land to cultivate or a lagoon to fish. This has led to generational poverty. As a result of being displaced they have lost their cultural heritage – traditional customs and skills, which were passed down from generation to generation.

The impacts of nuclear testing are distinctly unjust. It impacts vulnerable people, and the after effects have kept them poor and disadvantaged. The people impacted were not those who had chosen to pursue nuclear weapons. Nor were they the ones involved in the geopolitical competition that spurred the nuclear arms race. However, they were the ones to face the consequences of somebody else's conflict.

Over time as the effects of testing became known outrage over nuclear testing built. Many people came together to protest the nuclear weapons countries actions. This led to a campaign to ban nuclear testing which resulted in the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) bans all nuclear test explosions, in the atmosphere, underwater and underground. The Treaty was opened for signature in 1996.

It has been signed by 187 countries and ratified² by 178. However, it has not entered into force as 44 countries that hold nuclear technology must sign and ratify the CTBT first. Ratification by nine of these countries is still required: China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, the Russian Federation³ and the United States. Of these, India, North Korea, and Pakistan are yet to sign the Treaty.

Although the Treaty has not yet entered into force, it has made a significant contribution to international peace and security. Most importantly it has helped to establish a strong global norm against nuclear testing. The establishment of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) and its international monitoring system⁴ has built confidence that any nuclear test explosion would be reliably detected. For example, all of North Korea's nuclear tests were detected and Member States of the CTBT received information about the location, magnitude, time and depth of the tests within two hours.

Nuclear Weapons Non-Proliferation or Disarmament Treaties

In parallel to efforts to ban nuclear testing there has been an effort to combat the threat of nuclear weapons. This manifested firstly as an attempt to stop the spread of nuclear weapons to countries, also known as non-proliferation, and later an attempt to ban nuclear weapons themselves and have the countries who possess them give them up, also known as disarmament.

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is the centrepiece of global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to further the goal of nuclear disarmament⁵ and general and complete disarmament. It was opened for signature in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. 190 countries have ratified the NPT (though North Korea withdrew from the Treaty after it ratified it).

At the time, there were five nuclear-armed states: China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. Since then, India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan have developed nuclear weapons. These four are the only countries not party to the NPT.

² To ratify a treaty a country needs to officially approve it. This needs to be done in a country's domestic law-making body, such as a parliament.

³ The Russian federation revoked its ratification of the CTBT in 2023. Reportedly this was to bring its position in line with other countries who had not ratified the treaty.

⁴ The International Monitoring System (IMS) is a global network using state-of-the-art technologies to detect nuclear explosions. This includes radionuclide monitoring to detect radioactive particles and gases from a nuclear explosion in the atmosphere.

⁵ Disarmament is the reduction or elimination of weapons.

Under the NPT, countries without nuclear weapons agreed not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons. Countries with nuclear weapons at that point (China, France, Russia, the UK and the US) agreed not to help, encourage or induce any country without nuclear weapons to make or otherwise get nuclear weapons.

Initially intended to be temporary, in 1995, the NPT was extended indefinitely.

The Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

The initiative to seek a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons is an outcome of the effort centred on promoting greater awareness and understanding of the humanitarian consequences that result from use of nuclear weapons. A large part of this progress was due to the advocacy of non-governmental organisations, particularly the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) includes a comprehensive set of prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities. These include agreeing not to develop, test, produce, acquire, possess, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. The Treaty also prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons on national territory and the provision of assistance to any State in the conduct of these activities. Countries are obliged to prevent and stop any activity prohibited under the TPNW undertaken by persons or on territory under its jurisdiction or control.

Countries are obliged to provide assistance to all victims of the use and testing of nuclear weapons and to take measures for the remediation of contaminated environments. The preamble acknowledges the harm suffered as a result of nuclear weapons, including the disproportionate impact on women and girls, and on indigenous peoples around the world.

The TPNW was opened for signature in 2017 and entered into force in 2021.

A country that possesses nuclear weapons may join the treaty, so long as it agrees to destroy them in accordance with a legally binding, time-bound plan. Similarly, a country that hosts another country's nuclear weapons on its territory may join, so long as it agrees to remove them by a specified deadline.

The issue of nuclear waste

The manufacture, testing, or use of nuclear weapons creates nuclear waste which stays in the environment for thousands of years.

For example, uranium-235 (the type of uranium used in nuclear weapons and nuclear power) has a half-life⁶ of over 700 million years, while plutonium-239 has a half-life of 24,100 years.

This creates the issue of how to store waste that will continue to be dangerous to life and the environment for thousands of years.

All nuclear weapons and nuclear energy producing nations have caused some level of environmental contamination, both in their own countries and overseas. This includes nuclear testing in the South Pacific, Nevada, Kazakhstan, China, India and Pakistan; water and airborne discharges from reprocessing plants in the United Kingdom and France; and uranium mining in Namibia, Canada, former East Germany and Australia. Furthermore, this waste continues to be created through the ongoing production of both nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

In the United States alone, 'clean up' of nuclear waste is projected to cost more than \$300 billion, and even then, the contaminated sites will require monitoring and stewardship into the future.

An additional injustice is that nuclear waste storage sites are often chosen for political, not scientific reasons. In the United States, the populations that live nearby to waste sites are often predominately Hispanic and Native American and hold little or no political power. This is the case for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad, New Mexico and the proposed High-Level Radioactive Waste dump in Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

The burial of these materials must not be confused with their safe containment and isolation from the environment.

Waste from a nuclear warhead

Radioactive waste created in the manufacture of a single nuclear weapon containing 4 kg of plutonium-239 and 20 kg of uranium-235 include:

- 2,000 metric tons of uranium mining waste,
- 4 metric tons of depleted uranium,
- 12,000 curies of strontium-90,
- 12,000 curies of cesium-137,
- 50 cubic meters of 'low-level' waste
- 7 cubic meters of transuranic waste.

For an approximate picture of radioactive waste production to date, multiply the above by the estimated *70,000 nuclear warheads* that have been manufactured.

Renewed prominence

Nine countries have nuclear weapons: China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Between them they have over 12,000 nuclear weapons. However, they differ greatly in the size of their nuclear arsenals. Russia and

⁶ Half-life measures the time taken for half of the radioactive sample to decay. It is a measure of how long a radioactive isotope remains in the environment.

the United States have the majority of the world's nuclear weapons, with thousands each, while the others have much smaller stockpiles (see graphic).

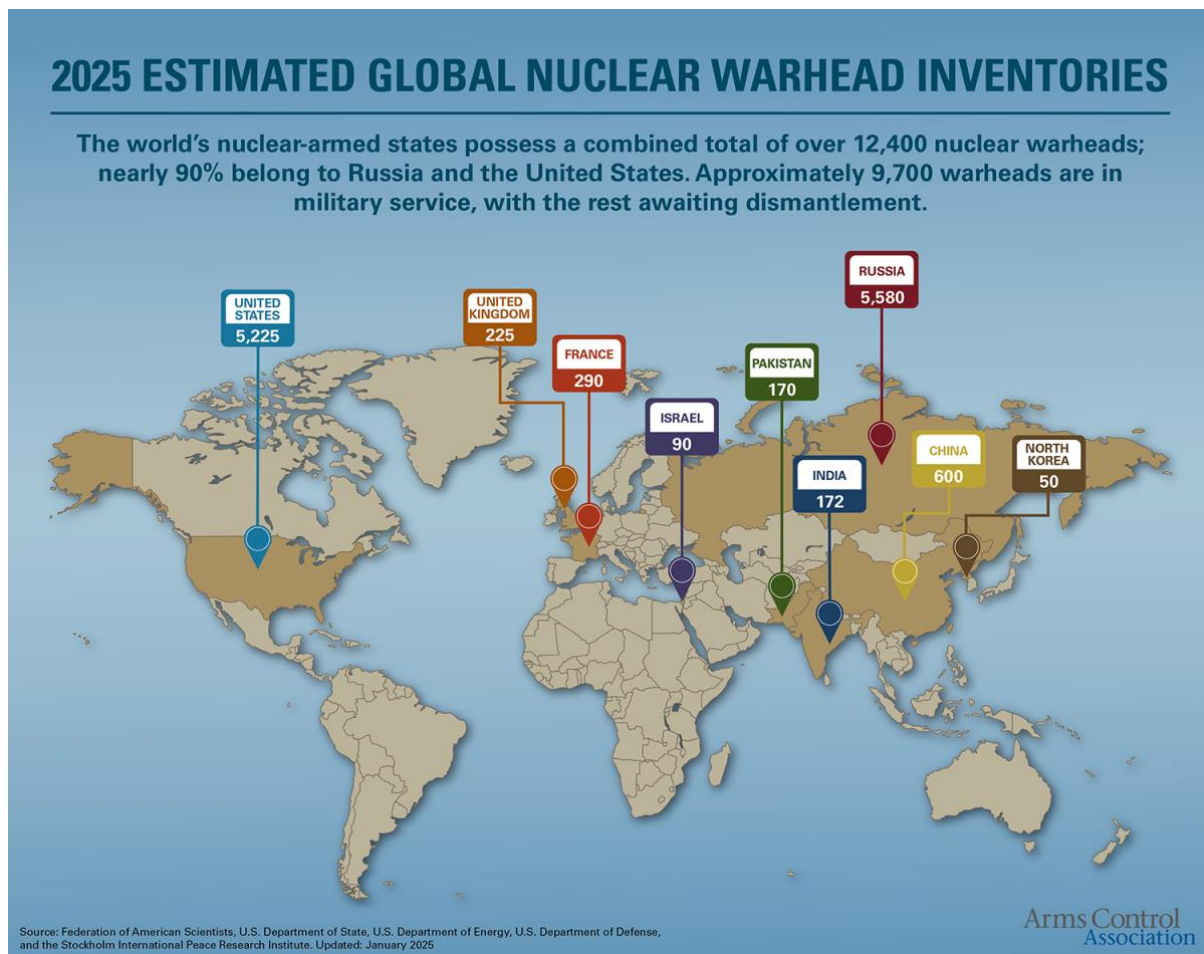


Figure: 2025 Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead inventories Source: Arms Control Association (www.armscontrol.org)

This is a substantial decrease from its highest point during the Cold War: 70,300 in 1986 to an estimated 12,241 at the beginning of 2025. This is due to the treaties described above and bilateral treaties between the Soviet Union (later Russia) and the US. The number of nuclear weapons has decreased for decades. Unfortunately, more recently nuclear weapons are again finding more prominence in countries defence doctrines and countries are spending more money modernising their weapons.

Global spending on nuclear weapons is estimated to be \$91.4 billion, equivalent of \$173,884 every minute. The United States spent the most in 2023 by some margin: \$51.5 billion, with China coming in second with a total of \$11.9 billion. 2023 was not an outlier but the continuation of a trend. From 2019 to 2023, global spending rose by 34 percent. As reported by ICAN, a cumulative \$387 billion was spent to build and maintain nuclear weapons over this five year period.

Imagine if this money was used to help the poor and vulnerable or address climate change?

Despite the known costs – financial, human and environmental – of the continued development and importance placed on nuclear weapons at least nine countries retain their nuclear weapons stockpiles, and some are investing in expanding and modernising them.

But the destructive nature of nuclear weapons undermines the inherent human dignity of each person.

We are called to care for our common home and be the stewards of God's creation, but nuclear weapons are a threat to our common home and all of God's creation.

We are called to advocate and empower those who are marginalised and do not have the ability to advocate for themselves, but the nuclear weapons industry takes advantage of those who are marginalised and further damages the environment they live in.

Organisations working on it

The **United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)** promotes disarmament efforts globally to ensure peace and security. Its mission is to support nuclear disarmament, arms control, and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction while addressing the threats posed by conventional arms. Key activities include fostering international agreements, raising awareness on disarmament issues, and providing technical and policy support to member states in their efforts to eliminate arms and reduce armed conflict.

The **International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)** is a coalition of non-governmental organizations in one hundred countries promoting adherence to and implementation of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Its focus is on persuading nations to sign and ratify it, and then to work for its full implementation. Through advocacy ICAN aims to stigmatise, prohibit & eliminate nuclear weapons.

Land Mines

Anti-personnel landmines are explosive devices designed to injure or kill people. They are laid during conflicts to restrict the movement of enemy forces. However, they are indiscriminate weapons and cannot tell the difference between military forces or civilians. They remain a threat to life for decades after they are laid, injuring or killing children, soldiers, peacekeepers, aid workers and agricultural workers alike. They restrict the movement of people and humanitarian aid, make land unsuitable for farming, and deny citizens access to water, food, care and trade.

According to the Landmine Monitor, over 54 countries and territories in all regions of the world are affected by landmines and/or explosive remnants of war. Nobody knows how many mines are in the ground. But the actual number is less important than their impact: it can take only two or three mines or the mere suspicion of their presence to render a patch of land unusable.

In 2023, at least 5,757 casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war were recorded (Landmine monitor). 4,335 of these were civilians, with over 1,400 children.

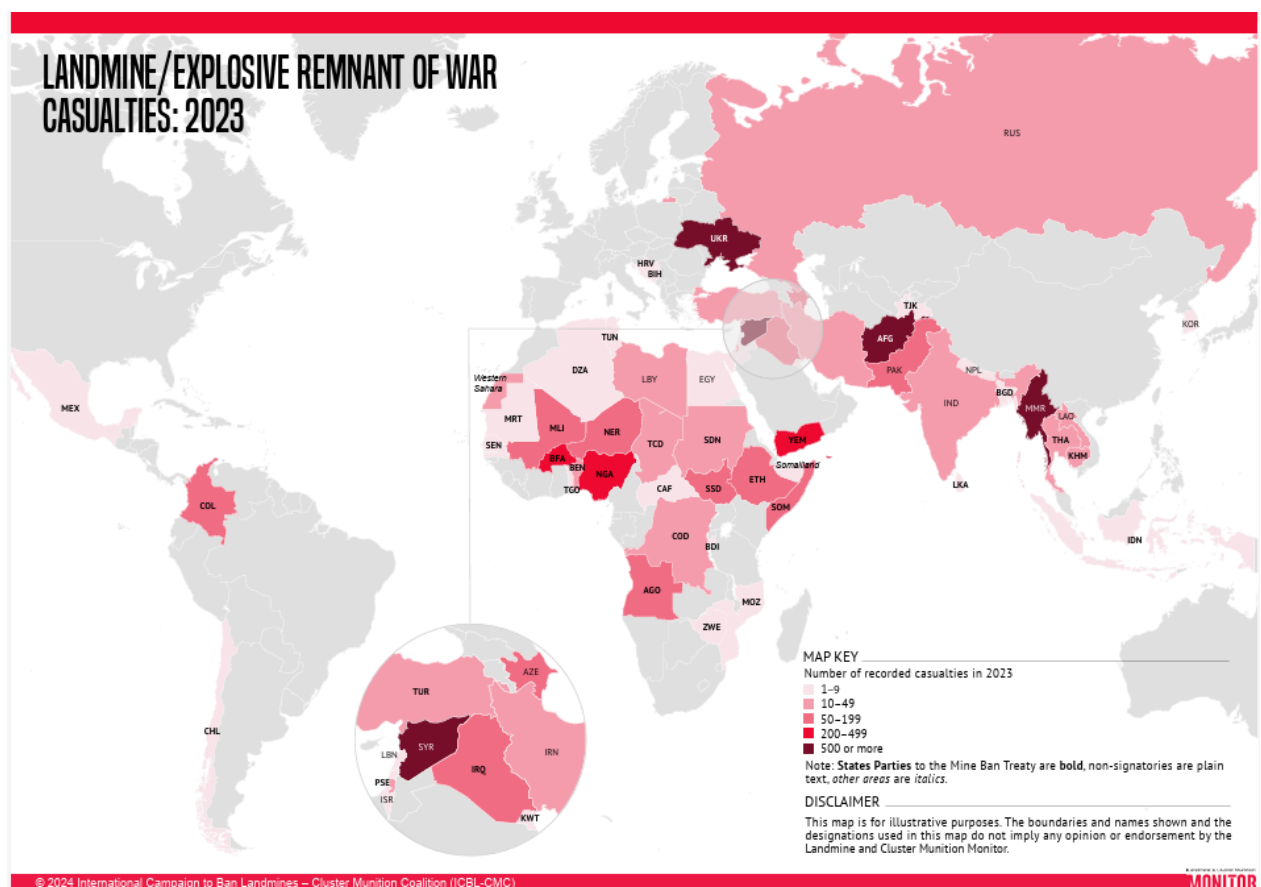


Figure: Landmine/explosive remanent of war casualties for 2023. Source: Landmine Monitor (© Landmine Monitor 2024)

Landmines come in many different shapes and can be buried or left above ground. A common type, known as the “butterfly” mine - comes in bright colours, making it attractive to curious children. Some designs can be produced for as little as \$1.

They not only cost lives and limbs but also prevent communities from accessing land that could be used for farming or building hospitals and schools as well as essential services such as food, water, health care and humanitarian aid.

1997 Mine Ban Treaty

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (also known as Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, Ottawa Convention, or Mine Ban Treaty) bans the use, production, stockpiling, and transfer of anti-personnel mines. It also requires countries to destroy their stockpiles and clear all mined areas as well as assist landmine survivors. A total of 164 states have joined the Mine Ban Treaty but China, India, Russia, Pakistan, and the US have not.

The Mine Ban Treaty is a result of a grassroots campaign involving non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In their work, these NGOs, which included human rights organizations, children's groups, development organizations, refugee organizations, religious groups, medical and humanitarian relief groups, came face to face with the impacts that landmines had on the communities they were trying to help. These NGOs came together in an organized effort to ban anti-personnel landmines. Their campaign centred survivors' stories and advocated for banning landmines due to the humanitarian impacts. They managed to build such political pressure and momentum surrounding the issue of anti-personnel land mines that, within five years, the international community came together to negotiate a treaty banning them. From this inauspicious beginning, the International Campaign has become an unprecedented coalition of over 1,200 organizations working together in 80 countries, to achieve the common goal of a ban on anti-personnel landmines.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for their work for the banning and clearing of anti-personnel mines. People from the Mercy world were involved in this campaign, including Sister Denise Coghlan and Sister Patricia Pak Poy, Sisters of Mercy.

Through their example we can see how living the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy can make an impact in today's world with modern issues. In Sister Denise Coghlan's work in Cambodia, she comforted the afflicted and listened to their stories. From listening to their stories she helped to organise opportunities for the landmines survivors to tell their stories on the international stage. Thus, she helped them to educate world leaders on the realities of the legacy of landmines (education is another work of Mercy).

Below is a photo that shows her and the team at Metta Karuna Reflection Centre continuing their work educating people on the realities of landmines; this time with the fellows of MELF cohort four.



Figure: Sr Denise Coghlan (left) and staff at Metta Karuna reflection centre in Cambodia talk to MELF cohort four about the campaign to ban landmines and winning the Nobel Peace Prize, September 2024 (with the large photo in the background showing the presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize to Tun Channereth in 1997) Photography: T Vaughan

Meanwhile, Sister Patricia Pak Poy was a key figure in the Australian campaign. In 1991, after seeing the reality of the impacts of landmines on the Thai/Cambodia border, she drew together many Australian individuals and representatives of humanitarian non-government organisations to form the Australian Network of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. In this organisation she was instrumental in creating the groundswell of public support in Australia for banning landmines. She also lobbied the Australian government, presented to parliamentary committees and met with the Australian Ministry of Defence and Department of Foreign Affairs.

Additionally, Mercy Global Action (MGA) works closely with other organisations in its advocacy at the UN. This includes Pax Christi International who have worked tirelessly promoting the Mine Ban Treaty and advocating for the countries that are yet to sign to do so.

Over 25 years later landmines are still an issue

In the 25 years since the Mine Ban Treaty came into force the number of countries with areas contaminated with landmines has decreased from 99 to 54. The estimated number of casualties has decreased from 25,000 to 6,000 per year. This is representative of the huge efforts that countries and NGOs have put into clearing landmines.

However, the Mine Ban Treaty is facing unprecedented challenges with multiple countries in Europe, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, and Ukraine either planning to withdraw or have withdrawn. They have that stated this is a result of the rising threat from Russia, as evidenced by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. They all share a border with Russia and have

stated they wish to be ready to use landmines to protect their borders should they need to. Several of these countries are also looking at manufacturing landmines. While these countries' security concerns are legitimate, landmines provide little military value and have an extremely high humanitarian impact.

A 1996 study commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) examined the military effectiveness of landmines in 26 conflicts since World War II and found that "that AP mines have proven to be weapons of severely limited utility" which "is far outweighed by the appalling humanitarian consequences of their use in actual conflicts". In this study one UK General noted, "there is no case known where AP mines as such have influenced a campaign, a battle or even a skirmish in any decisive way".

Anti-personnel landmines have been used extensively by Russia in Ukraine, with the UN estimating Ukraine is now the most mined country in the world. In response, the US has provided landmines to Ukraine. While the US is not a party to the Mine Ban Treaty, longstanding policy stated it will "not export or transfer" anti-personnel mines. Ukraine, a State Party to the treaty, is prohibited under the treaty from acquiring or using any type of anti-personnel landmines "under any circumstances".

The Mine Ban Treaty now forms an integral part of international humanitarian law (IHL), which must - logically and legally - be applied in times of conflict, just as in times of peace. In providing prohibited mines to Ukraine, the US is encouraging Ukraine to violate its legal obligations and is undermining the core principles of international law.

Syria

Syria is extensively contaminated by landmines as a result of 15 years of Civil War, as well as by those remaining from successive Arab-Israeli wars since 1948. The full extent of contamination in Syria remains unknown, and no country-wide survey has taken place.

After the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, many refugees, both internally displaced and those in neighbouring countries, have decided to return to Syria. It has been reported that tens of thousands of people have been travelling through heavily mined areas daily. This has led to a substantial increase in incidents involving landmines; the number of mine incidents in Syria rose by more than 300% in December 2024 compared to the previous month. Landmines are a significant obstacle to the return of internally displaced persons, and to agriculture and food production in many parts of the country. In 2024, landmine contamination was estimated to affect 14.4 million people—65% of the population. Contamination obstructed humanitarian aid in 54% of sub-districts and posed a high operational risk to humanitarian activities. The presence of landmines has further exacerbated the vulnerability of Syrian communities, limiting access to agricultural land, schools, and healthcare facilities.

Clearance in Syria has been limited due to safety and security restrictions, which have impacted operational reach. Additionally, the recent political change has complicated the operating environment as shifting control over affected territories had the potential to disrupt the continuity of existing mine action programs. However, despite this from December 2024 to

mid-February 2025, 138 minefields and contaminated areas were identified in Syria, and more than 1,400 unexploded ordinance items were disposed of.

Success stories

Since the Treaty entered into force in 1999, a total of 33 countries have completely cleared anti-personnel landmines from their territory. Collectively more than 55 million landmines have been destroyed. In 2023, 281 km² of contaminated land was cleared which resulted in 160,566 anti-personnel landmines being removed and destroyed (Hunt 2025). In 2022, 219 km² of contaminated land was cleared in 2022, with 169,276 anti-personnel mines destroyed.

Cambodia

Landmines were laid in Cambodia during the ousting of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Throughout the 80s and 90s they had a devastating impact on the people of Cambodia. Over 65,000 casualties have been recorded since 1979, resulting in 18,800 people being killed and nearly 45,000 people injured, of whom 9,087 had to have an amputation due to their injuries.

After years of clearance activity there has been a huge reduction in casualties from over 20,000 a year in the early 1990s to 49 recorded in 2024 according to the Cambodian Mine Action Authority.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan landmines have maimed or killed more people than anywhere else. More than 18 million landmines have been cleared since 1989, freeing over 3,011 km² of land that has benefited more than 3,000 mostly rural communities across the country (UN News, April 2023).

Organisations working on it

The **International Campaign to Ban Landmines** is a global network dedicated to the eradication of landmines and other explosive remnants of war. They work for the complete prohibition and elimination of landmines through advocacy, public education, and support for affected communities. They played a crucial role in the adoption of the Ottawa Treaty in 1997.

Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor (also known as the Monitor) is the research and monitoring initiative of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC), now ICBL-CMC. It has provided civil-society reporting on landmines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war since 1999 and tracks adherence to and compliance with the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) works to eliminate the threat posed by mines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices by coordinating United Nations mine action, leading operational responses at the country level, and in support of peace operations. As a specialised service of the United Nations located within the Department of Peace Operations, UNMAS operates under UN legislative mandates of both the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Conclusion

Micah challenges us to act justly

Jesus challenges us to love our neighbour

Catherine challenges us to serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor

Pope Francis challenges us to protect God's handiwork

Caritas challenges us to build peace together

In 2025, countries are once again looking to these indiscriminate weapons to provide them security when they feel threatened. However, in the increasingly tense geopolitical environment they are forgetting the humanitarian impact of these weapons, the lasting effects they have on civilians. Now more than ever we need to remind them of this, elevate the discussion, centre it on people and the humanitarian impacts of using these weapons.

We do have some power at the structural and interpersonal level, especially when we work together. It is up to us to advocate for people as Catherine would have done. She was a wealthy woman who chose to help the poor and to educate women for a better life. Those of us who are now wealthy women, both in money and education, can follow in her footsteps. To advocate for and empower people in these countries affected by the consequences of war. This is how we can respect and restore the dignity of each and every human person.

From Sparks to Fire, the Mercy guide to justice advocacy, is a useful resource to those interested in starting their advocacy journey. It contains the Mercy Justice Advocacy Framework, as well as practical tools, case studies and evaluation methods.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

What are nuclear weapons?

Nuclear weapons are among the most powerful and destructive weapons ever created. They are classed as weapons of mass destruction because of their ability to destroy cities.

Nuclear weapons were first developed during World War II. They get their destructive force from either the fission (splitting) of an atom or the fusion of two lighter atoms. These processes release large volumes of energy that give nuclear weapons their destructive force.



Current stockpiles

Nine countries collectively have over 12,000 weapons. They are China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the UK and the US. Russia and the US have about 85% the world's nuclear weapons.

Impacts of nuclear weapons

Two nuclear weapons have been used in a conflict: on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and on Nagasaki on August 9. The devastation caused by these bombs was unparalleled. Tens of thousands of people were killed, and many more suffered from radiation sickness, injuries, and long-term health effects.

The manufacture, testing or use of nuclear weapons creates nuclear waste which stays in the environment for thousands of years.

More than 2,000 nuclear weapon tests have been carried out. This has impacted the health of the people living nearby and polluted soil and water at nuclear weapons facilities all over the world. These tests often were undertaken in the colonies or territories the nuclear weapon states had at the time. For example, the UK tested in Australia, the US tested in the Marshall Islands, the Soviet Union tested in Kazakhstan, and France tested in French Polynesia.

Often the indigenous people near the testing sites were exposed. As were some service people, both intentionally to determine the effects of exposure but also during the clean up afterwards. This has led to decades of health issues for those exposed and long campaigns by victims for acknowledgement of the harm done.

Treaties

As the impacts of nuclear weapons became better understood there has been movements, often led by non-governmental organisations, to ban nuclear testing and decrease the risk from nuclear weapons. This has led to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (which bans all nuclear tests), the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (designed to limit the spread of nuclear weapons) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (which bans nuclear weapons and is designed to help achieve full nuclear disarmament).

Resurgence in importance

With increasing strategic competition between countries, nuclear weapons have gained increasing prominence in countries' military doctrines. Recently China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Russia and the UK have been increasing the number of nuclear weapons they have.

Despite the costs, humanitarian, environmental and financial, countries are reinvesting in their nuclear weapons and placing increasing importance on them for this security.

What can you do?

International issues such as these can feel overwhelming. But when people work together, they can have a real impact. Remember the TPNW exists due to the work of many.

Contact your elected officials and make sure they know these issues are important to you. Political will and public pressure can be key to getting progress on these issues.

Find an organisation working on nuclear issues in your country and join their efforts.

The ICAN website has a list:
https://www.icanw.org/new_zealand#countries-list

Stay informed by following the social media accounts of organisations working on these issues, such as ICAN and the UN Disarmament affairs office ([@unitednations_oda](https://twitter.com/unitednations_oda))

Visit the UN Youth4Disarmament website:
<https://youth4disarmament.org/>

LAND MINES

What are landmines?

Anti-personnel landmines are explosive devices designed to injure or kill people. They are usually laid during a conflict to restrict the movement of people. They are indiscriminate weapons and cannot tell the difference between military forces and civilians. They remain a threat to life for decades after they are laid, injuring or killing children, soldiers, peacekeepers, aid workers and agricultural workers alike.



- In 2023, at least 5,757 casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war were recorded. Civilians made up 84% of these, with 37% of those children.

Landmines make it difficult for countries to recover after a conflict. They restrict the movement of people and humanitarian aid, make land unsuitable for farming, and deny citizens access to water, food, care and trade.

The impacts of these weapons are felt disproportionately by the poor and vulnerable and trap people in these situations or make them worse through injury or death.

The 1997 Mine Ban Treaty

The lasting impacts of landmines on civilians led to a grassroots campaign led by non-governmental organisations, under the name International Campaign to Ban Landmines, to ban landmines. The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction was the result.

Since the ban came into force countries have put huge efforts into destroying their stockpiles of landmines and clear land contaminated with landmines.

- Estimated number of casualties has decreased from 25,000 per year to 6,000 per year.

Challenges to the ban

Landmines have been used in the war in Ukraine. Initially it was just by Russia but then the US provided Ukraine (a signatory to the Mine Ban Treaty) landmines.

Additionally, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, and Ukraine are either planning to withdraw or have withdrawn from the Mine Ban Treaty. They have stated this is a result of the rising threat from Russia, as evidenced by Russian aggression in Ukraine. They all share a

border with Russia and have stated they wish to be ready to use landmines to protect their borders should they need to. While these countries' security concerns are legitimate, landmines provide little military value and have an extremely high humanitarian impact.

What can you do?

International issues such as these can feel overwhelming and intractable. But the success of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) shows how when people work together, they can have a real impact.

- Contact your elected officials and make sure they know these issues are important to you. Political will and public pressure can be key to getting progress on these issues.
- The work of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines is ongoing as they work to clear landmines from affected countries and get all countries to join the ban. Their website has resources you can use to raise awareness or contact governments:
<https://www.icblcmc.org/our-impact/protect-the-mine-ban-treaty>
- Stay informed by following the social media accounts of organisations working on these issues, this includes the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (Instagram (@icbl_cmc), Facebook (@International Campaign to Ban Landmines)) and the UN Disarmament Office (@unitednations_oda).
- To find what organisations in your country are working on this issue go to the “get involved” of the ICBL website: <https://www.icblcmc.org/get-involved>
- Visit the UN Youth4Disarmament website: <https://youth4disarmament.org/>



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