

World's first nuclear weapons ban goes into effect

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue



The Genbaku Dome, also known as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, is the only structure left standing in the area where the first atomic bomb detonated in 1945. Everyone inside was killed. (Photo used via Creative Commons license)

The United Nations' Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons went into effect on January 22, making nuclear weapons illegal under international law for the first time.

More than 80 nations have signed the treaty, which prohibits countries from producing and possessing nuclear weapons and from allowing them to be stationed within their borders. Notably absent among the signatories, however, are the nine nations believed to have nuclear weapons: the United States, China, France, Great Britain, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia.

Japan—the only country to have suffered an atomic bomb attack—declined to sign the treaty as well, saying that while the nation shares the UN’s ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament, it believes the UN treaty process has created unnecessary divisions between nuclear and nonnuclear states, divisions that actually inhibit success.

Without the participation of nuclear states, the new illegality of nuclear weapons is mostly symbolic, although nuclear abolitionists are counting the treaty’s moral statement as a win.

The UK-based Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament said they were giving “thanks to God” for the treaty. Pax Christi International, the Catholic peace group, issued a statement saying they were encouraged by the broad international support for the treaty.

“The worst of all weapons of mass destruction has long-since been judged to be immoral,” the statement continued. “Now it is also finally illegal.”

In Japan, the *hibakusha*—the name given to survivors of the atomic bombs—overwhelmingly supported the treaty. In 2019, they delivered to the UN an appeal in support of the treaty that included more than 10 million signatures.

“So that the people of future generations will not have to experience hell on earth,” the appeal read, “we want to realize a world free of nuclear weapons while we are still alive.”