

Hon Phil Goff, Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control
Wellington Conference on Cluster Munitions, Opening Ceremony
Wellington Town Hall Convention Centre
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Ms Hilde Johnson, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director representing the United Nations, Excellencies, Ambassador Don MacKay, cluster munitions survivors, members of civil society, ladies and gentlemen.

I thank the tangata whenua Te Atiawa for their warm welcome.

It is a privilege today to open the Wellington Conference on Cluster Munitions.

We are just a year on from when a group of 46 states, including New Zealand, signed up to a declaration in Norway that committed us to work to stop the human suffering caused by cluster munitions.

This marked the beginning of the Oslo Process, which set us on the path to concluding a new convention on cluster munitions by the end of this year. We are making solid progress towards that goal.

With the failure of previous efforts to set rules around these weapons, the Oslo Process represents the best prospect we have to stop unacceptable harm to civilians caused by cluster munitions.

The process has gone from strength to strength; from the 46 states at Oslo, the number has grown dramatically, and there are over 550 delegates from 122 states represented here in Wellington. That strong commitment has put political momentum behind the Oslo Process.

Cluster munitions have inflicted unacceptable harm on civilian populations. Many countries have seen the deadly legacy of contamination resulting from cluster submunitions failing to detonate.

It is civilians who are killed and injured by unexploded cluster munitions. Decades after their use in battle, people are still being killed or maimed by such munitions. The tragedy of lost lives and horrific injuries is evident across the world, from Southeast Asia to the Balkans, Africa and in the Middle East.

Unexploded cluster munitions also present a huge obstacle to post conflict communities seeking to re-build their lives. Economic reconstruction and social recovery cannot take place until explosive ordnance are cleared and destroyed. The task of clearance is a huge and daunting challenge.

It's time for us to deal with the cause of the problem. The legacy of unexploded cluster munitions endangers civilian lives in the same way that landmines do and the problem needs to be dealt with in a similar manner.

New Zealand's commitment to working with others to stop the human cost of cluster munitions has not been lessened either by our size as a country or our distance from conflict.

Out in the field, New Zealand has sent teams of clearance experts from our Defence Force to help clear the estimated one million unexploded cluster submunitions that littered Southern Lebanon after the 2006 conflict. Earlier we had Defence Force personnel working for many years in Laos, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola and Afghanistan clearing landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Our aid agency, NZAID, has provided support to rehabilitation programmes to assist victims of unexploded ordnance, including unexploded cluster submunitions, in affected countries in Southeast Asia.

It is, however, now time to put the fence at the top of the cliff, and not simply be the ambulance at the bottom. We need to eliminate the use of cluster munitions which have an unacceptable effect on civilian populations.

We are getting to the hard end of the Oslo Process. The conference this week represents a crucial stepping stone to our final objective. As we get closer to concluding a new convention, we will need to work hard to reach agreement on some key issues. I urge you to work in the spirit of constructive engagement towards the result all of us desire – a strong and effective treaty with wide support.

I would encourage states to remain open-minded on solutions and possible outcomes. We should all endeavour to build on common ground and find ways to bridge the areas of difference.

We must make substantive progress at this week's meeting in order to lay a solid foundation for the formal negotiations to be held at the Diplomatic Conference in Dublin in May. The more that we can progress here in Wellington, the greater the chance of agreement on a new convention in Dublin.

At the end of this conference, states will have the opportunity to subscribe to a declaration that provides the ticket to negotiating a new convention in Dublin. The "Wellington Declaration" will be a key outcome of this meeting; I urge all states represented here to subscribe to the Declaration at the end of the conference on Friday or in the period leading up to Dublin.

As we pursue our negotiations of a new disarmament treaty, we should have clearly in our minds the needs of those who have survived the impact of cluster munitions. The survivors represented at this conference are here to remind us why we need a treaty on cluster munitions and why this needs to be progressed urgently.

They are also a reminder of the obligations on us to address the needs of survivors, their families, and the communities which are required to provide care and support to those directly impacted for the rest of their lives.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of others in the lead-up to this Conference. In particular, I would like to thank Norway for its generous contribution to the sponsorship of many developing countries to attend this week's meeting.

I wish also to acknowledge the strong presence by civil society as well as international organisations such as the UN and its agencies, and the ICRC.

The Cluster Munition Coalition in particular has helped to mobilise civil society action on the issue. The CMC, through its global networks, has played an important role in ensuring that the momentum behind the Oslo Process is maintained.

I am conscious that the eyes of the world are on us as we set to work this week. This is the chance to show the international community that, in partnership with civil society and international agencies, we can forge a path to a new convention that makes a real difference to people's lives.

I wish you much progress in your deliberations over the coming week.