

Has France forgotten Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

*** By member organizations of the ICAN France campaign (list below)**

Oped published in the French newspaper *Libération* on 5 August 2025

Emmanuel Macron's idea of Europeanizing France's nuclear deterrent is part of a deadly rush forward that is dangerously spreading across the world, NGOs warn, as we commemorate the horror of August 6 and 9, 1945. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, 220,000 people died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki between August 6 and 9 and the end of 1945. Among them were nearly 38,000 children. Those who survived, the hibakusha, are the living memory of nuclear horror. They have been marked every day of their lives in their flesh and spirit: radiation-induced diseases, social exclusion, post-traumatic stress, miscarriages... Their descendants are also affected by these explosions.

Visiting Hiroshima or Nagasaki is a deeply moving experience for anyone who goes to these places of remembrance. How, then, can we explain that Emmanuel Macron was able to write, in 2023, in the guest book of the Hiroshima Peace Museum, following the G7 meeting, these words of compassion borrowed from Albert Camus, that "peace is the only fight worth fighting," and then hammer home, in a martial tone, on July 13 during a speech to the armed forces: "To be free in this world, you must be feared. To be feared, you must be powerful"? In a matter of seconds, his compassion for the victims gave way to the peremptory assertion of a power based on the perpetuation of a nuclear arsenal and the permanent threat of the use of these weapons of mass destruction.

Beyond ethics, these words strike at the very foundations of international law. They contradict the United Nations Charter, which calls for "maintaining peace," "refraining from the threat or use of force," and acting to reduce armaments. They trample on the principles of collective security, international cooperation, and sovereign equality among peoples.

The commemorations on August 6 and 9 have only one purpose: to remember the unthinkable in order to prevent it from happening again. Yet the signs are worrying. Although nuclear weapons have not been used directly in war since 1945, the taboo surrounding their use is cracking. Discourse encouraging more nuclear weapons as a means of protection (for example, by Belgian Prime Minister De Wever and Polish President Duda) and actions Hiroshima, Japan, about a month after the US nuclear bombing of August 6, 1945) or proliferating (increases in British and Chinese arsenals, strengthening of India's nuclear air force through the sale of Rafale fighter jets), added to explicit threats (Russia, North Korea), make the end of this taboo possible.

The President wants to extend the shadow of France's deterrence to the European level. To scare Putin, compensate for the American withdrawal, guarantee the security of the continent... This reasoning, which looks like a strategy, is in reality nothing more than a headlong rush. It fuels a spiral of insecurity, where every move provokes a reaction, where nuclear proliferation is inevitable.

Faced with this logic of preparing for collective suicide, a growing majority of states, including European ones, parties to, or signatories of, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), are now openly challenging this worldview based on nuclear deterrence. Their attitude is based primarily on a logic of strengthening collective security, not on naivety or idealism. They

too want to protect their “vital interests,” which are constantly threatened by the potential consequences of the deliberate, unintentional, accidental, or miscalculated use of nuclear weapons. They know that a nuclear war in the heart of Europe or in South Asia will have humanitarian, economic, and climatic consequences, regardless of the geographical location of their state.

Secondly, these states point out that nuclear deterrence is an unverifiable theory, based on luck and a perception of the rationality of adversaries, which is necessarily different for each of the protagonists. At the third TPNW meeting in March 2025, they stated unequivocally: "The claim that nuclear deterrence has already prevented large-scale war and nuclear conflict [is] impossible to prove conclusively, and there is no certainty about its future effectiveness."

Finally, the governments involved in the TPNW are clear-headed: nuclear deterrence is not the solution, it is the problem. It perpetuates a logic of confrontation, reinforces the arms race (both nuclear and conventional), weakens treaties, and ultimately legitimizes the use of threats as a means of relations between states. The idea of Europeanizing French deterrence is a dangerous spiral. It will provoke Russian reactions, fuel the ambitions of other nuclear or threshold powers, and contribute to the end of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Albert Camus' appeal on August 8, 1945, two days after Hiroshima, is more relevant than ever: "Faced with the terrifying prospects opening up before humanity, we see even more clearly that peace is the only battle worth fighting. It is no longer a prayer, but a command that must rise from the people to their governments, the command to choose definitively between hell and reason."

*** Signatories :**

Greenpeace France, Observatoire des armements, Initiatives pour le désarmement nucléaire, Mouvement national de lutte pour l'environnement, Mouvement pour une alternative Non-violente, Pugwash-France, Union européenne de la paix, Mouvement de la paix, Collectif Bourgogne-Franche-Comté pour l'abolition des armes nucléaires, Abolition des armes nucléaires – Maison de vigilance, Collectif finistérien pour l'interdiction des armes nucléaires, Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples, Agir pour le désarmement nucléaire Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Feyzin-Europe, Mouvement international de la réconciliation France, Union démocratique bretonne, mouvement Utopia, réseau Sortir du nucléaire.

Translation in English by Initiatives pour le désarmement nucléaire