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Demonstrators march following U.S attack on Iran's nuclear sites and against Iran-Israel conflict, at Times Square in New York City, U.S. June 22, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Caitlin Ochs)

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Representatives of various groups, including one that earned a Nobel Peace Prize, gathered at an interfaith event in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to call for nuclear disarmament worldwide. Hosted by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe July 13, the group observed the 80th anniversary of the first ever atomic bomb test that took place in south-central New Mexico by highlighting concerns over the devastating effects and mass destruction wrought by nuclear weapons.

The massive explosion on July 16, 1945, the culmination of the codenamed "Trinity" project, in White Sands National Park could be felt within a 160-mile radius, and covered an area populated by about 500,000 mostly Latino and Native American residents.

The local population, according to documentarians and witnesses who experienced the test, did not receive prior warnings about the detrimental health effects of the nuclear explosion that took place just a few miles from their homes. Some experienced a shower of ash while others spent days and days dusting it off from their homes. The earliest reported harmful effects were an increase in infant deaths months after the test, and then a surge in cancer cases, among other serious health issues that residents say continue to plague the local population.

Tina Cordova, a resident who grew up in Tularosa, a town adjacent to the site of the Trinity test explosion, heads Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium. For the past 20 years, her group had been advocating for New Mexico's inclusion in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, or RECA, particularly the state's uranium mine workers, mostly Indigenous people, who were exposed to dangerous radioactive levels. Cordova, a cancer survivor, noted that recently the act was expanded to include her home state.

"For the first time ever, we now have acknowledgement from the federal government and a program in place that will pay a very small amount of money, $100,000, in reparations," said Cordova. "I say all the time, the $100,000 that they will offer to my mother will never replace the father that we buried that should still be here today. My father was a four-year-old child living a completely organic lifestyle in Tularosa, never knowing that the ash that fell in those days afterwards — that contaminated their water supply and their food supply — that it was dangerous."

The U.S. Department of Justice announced July 3 that Congress reauthorized RECA claims and that claims could not yet be filed while the department was reviewing amendments in the act.

Speakers at the interfaith observance called "80 Years and Still Waiting: A World Without Nuclear Weapons" in Albuquerque included members of Soka Gakkai International, a Japan-based Buddhist group focused on promoting peace through "key actions" such as nuclear disarmament; Students for Nuclear Disarmament, a youth awareness campaign on the harms of nuclear weapons at college campuses across the country; and the head of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, who drew attention to the U.S. government's nearly $2 trillion nuclear weapons modernization plan.

Songs of peace and prayers from Christian and Jewish groups were interspersed with the talks.

Dr. Ira Helfand said it is important to undo the harm of past atomic bomb explosions in New Mexico and Japan, but that it is also important to look at the present, in which he said five nations that have nuclear weapons "have engaged in active warfare." The five include the U.S. June 21 strike of Iran's nuclear facilities in Iran's conflict with Israel and recent tensions between India and Pakistan.

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Helfand, a retired Massachusetts internist, is past president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and on the steering group of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. Helfand gave an assessment of the strength of today's nuclear weapons which have about 10 times the power of those used by the U.S. against

Japan (the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II) and held by superpowers with mega cities.

"In the cases of New York or Moscow or Beijing, we're talking about 12 to 15, possibly 18 million people dead in a half an hour. And if this were part of a large-scale war between the United States and Russia, or the United States and China, this kind of destruction would take place in every major city in each of these countries," he said. "All told, 200-300 million people dead in an afternoon."

He urged ordinary citizens to push for the dismantling of nuclear weapons and to convince leaders "the nuclear policy they are pursuing is profoundly dangerous," citing the conclusion by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev that nuclear disarmament would achieve "genuine security." But the U.S. formally pulled out of the agreement those leaders struck, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, in 2019.

ICAN Executive Director Melissa Parke, from Australia, said she hoped to see "truth telling" on the part of the U.S. government regarding the effects of the Trinity test and other nuclear weapons' development as well as an apology and "recognition that nuclear weapons do not provide national security."

"The case for disarmament is not utopian," said Parke. "It is existential, and therefore must be reframed as a global security imperative. The future demands common security, not mutual destruction. The solidarity between peoples impacted by nuclear weapons' use and testing and all that comes with those activities, has fueled a global movement to end nuclear weapons."

Parke pointed to the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a legally binding document that would ban nuclear weapons aimed at their total elimination. So far the treaty has 94 signatory countries, not including the U.S., which has "strongly encouraged" other nations to vote against the resolution, according to ICAN.

The Holy See is listed as one of the first signatories to the TPNW on Sept. 20, 2017, the first day the U.N. opened it for signers.

Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester said the late Pope Francis' statement on nuclear weapons being immoral "was groundbreaking" and that the Vatican is very much behind the banning of nuclear weapons. But he said at the parish level it poses a

complicated question, because some of the faithful could interpret this as taking a political stance.

"We're called to speak the truth. So we must not let other people tell us that we can't speak that truth. So I think it's important, but I just want to underscore that there is that tension (for the faithful), and people are afraid," he said.

Moments later, the archbishop led the closing prayer of the event.

"We pray that what we've done here today might continue to light a spark and that might continue to further the cause of peace in our hearts and in our world," he said. "We pray for those who make decisions that affect all of us, that they might care about us ... (and) about all, especially the poor, and those who live on the margins and those who suffer so much every day."