

Nuclear Disarmament: Dream or Nightmare?

Remarks of Peter Weiss, LCNP President Emeritus

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First the bad news: The nuclear weapon states, led by the US, are putting abolition on the back burner. Listen to President Obama’s words. At Purdue University in 2008 he promised to make a nuclear weapons free world a central element of US policy, saying nothing about how long it might take. In the Prague speech next year he famously said it might not happen in his lifetime. He was 48 at the time. In Berlin, last year, it became “no matter how distant that dream may be.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that plans to maintain a secure, modernized US nuclear arsenal are proceeding apace at a cost of 600,000,000 or one trillion dollars for the next decade, depending on who is doing the estimating. Or that the US contribution to the UN General Assembly’s high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament last September was to call it a waste of time. Or that last February the US announced that it had conducted a successful analysis of a revamped B-61 nuclear gravity bomb. Or that the nuclear guidance promulgated by the Department of Defense last year stated that the time had not yet come to restrict the use of nukes strictly to deterrence, leaving open the question of what else they could be used for.

Add to this that not long ago an 84 year old nun and two colleagues demonstrated the lack of security of a proposed nuclear enrichment facility by making their way right up to its wall, for which they were thanked by receiving multi-year sentences for sabotage. And that nine high ranking military officers have just been fired from their posts involving nuclear weapons security for their failure to control the pervasive laxity of this rather important operation. And that word has come from Moscow that, if the US insists on imposing further sanctions as a result of the Ukrainian situation Russia may not consider itself bound to observe existing nuclear weapons agreements or to conclude new ones. And – you’ll love this – that Representative Duncan Hunter, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, is on record that if it comes to a military conflict with Iran over its nuclear weapons program, the US should conduct a massive aerial bombardment campaign with tactical nuclear weapons. Or that the nuclear security summit just concluded in The Hague dealt only with measures to keep nukes out of the hands of terrorists and made no mention of the self-evident fact that the only way to achieve satisfactory nuclear weapons security is to bring about a nuclear weapons free world.

I could go on, but let me get to the good news. 2013 has seen more action toward nuclear disarmament than many previous years. It started with a forum in February in the Foreign Ministry of Germany, a NATO country, on “Creating the Conditions and Building the

Framework for a Nuclear Weapons Free World”. March saw a conference convoked by Norway, another NATO country, on “The Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons”, with a follow-up conference hosted by the Mexican government in February 2014. Both of these were attended by well above a hundred governments and international organizations. Another breakthrough was the creation, by a mandate of the UN General Assembly, of the Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament, intended to circumvent the decades old paralysis of the UN Conference on Disarmament, which operates on a unanimity rule that enables one or more governments to block discussion of nuclear issues. In September, as mentioned above, the UN General Assembly held the first ever high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament. Presidents, prime ministers and other high level dignitaries from a great many countries used the occasion to demand accelerated action toward a nuclear weapons free world, as have, recently, resolutions of the GA First Committee, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Open-Ended Working Group and other international bodies.

The most promising outcome of all this activity is the announcement in February of the Austrian foreign minister to invite governments to Vienna toward the end of this year to go beyond description of the horrors of nuclear weapons and get down to the business of outlawing them, to recognize, in the words of foreign minister Kurz, that what is needed is a paradigm shift in the approach to the problem.

I can predict, with some confidence, that the attitude of the nuclear weapons states will be “If the states which have no nuclear weapons want to ban them by a legally binding treaty, let them. We will not do so until we can be convinced that such a treaty will contain foolproof assurance against the slightest breach.” Kennett Benedict has the answer to that argument in an article in the current issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, entitled “The Myth of Absolute Safety”.

To return, in conclusion, to the theme of this forum: Law alone cannot bring about a nuclear weapons free world. But law must be an essential component in the path leading to that goal. The law is clear. Nuclear weapons are, by their very nature, incompatible with humanitarian law. All that is needed is for the governments of this world to comply with the unanimous mandate of the International Court of Justice “to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.”