

Canada and the Humanitarian Movement to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

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Has the violence-torn summer of 2014 killed any hopes for progress in nuclear disarmament? Have the televised killings in the Middle-East, Ukraine, Syria and Iraq made it impossible to focus attention on the 16,300 nuclear weapons still in existence, any one of which, by design, accident or terrorism, could set off a catastrophe of epic proportions? On the contrary, global instability is not a time to back away from the United Nations goal of a nuclear weapons free world; rather, when barbarism breaks out, it is time to de-double our efforts to build the rule of law. Canada should step up its work and join with those states that are serious about developing a law to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Three events show that nuclear disarmament is still very much on the international political agenda.

- The first UN Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons - September 26 – now provides a built-in mechanism focused on promoting multilateral negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention – a global treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons.
- On December 8-9, the Austrian government will host in Vienna the third in a series of international conferences on

the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of nuclear weapons. The first of these conferences at Oslo in 2013 attracted 127 states; the second at Nayarit in Mexico last February was attended by 146. These meetings, buttressed by civil society campaigners, have spelled out in excruciating detail the horrors that await humanity in the accidental or deliberate use of nuclear weapons.

- Next May in New York, the Non-Proliferation Treaty will undergo its month-long quinquennial Review Conference, where the good faith pledge of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the principal nuclear weapons states) to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals will again be tested. Since the NPT came into existence in 1970, the big five have been bobbing and weaving on their commitments, all the while modernizing their stocks.

If nuclear disarmament had to wait for calm political weather to make progress, we would have nuclear weapons forever. Nuclear disarmament is not something that culminates the peace process, it stimulates it. Eliminating nuclear weapons requires vision and a sense of urgency. A terrorist nuclear attack is an undeniable possibility. How long can the world’s luck hold out? This is the view that drives a number of nations, and thus they want comprehensive negotiations to start now leading to a legal framework for the verified, irreversible, and enforceable elimination of nuclear weapons.

But the nuclear weapons states, aided principally by NATO, are holding out for a step-by-step approach: first, get a ban on the production of fissile materials, bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force, get more U.S.-Russian reductions before attempting global negotiations. This approach, which has been embraced by Canada, has led to today's virtual paralysis. U.S.-Russia bilateral negotiations for deeper cuts are stalled over such issues as the U.S.'s proposed missile defence system in Europe, the militarization of space, and the U.S. intention to militarily dominate air, land, sea, space and cyberwarfare. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has become a ritualistic façade.

Canada participates in the 12-nation Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, which sees multilateral negotiations taking place only after the U.S.-Russia reduction process has greatly reduced existing stocks. But this is a dead-end hope. This is why nations like Mexico, Norway, Austria, Switzerland and Indonesia are in the forefront of a new movement, emphasizing humanitarian law, to create a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons. "The time has come to initiate a diplomatic process [with] a specific timeframe," the Mexican chairman told the Nayarit meeting. This is the movement Canada should join.

A chief impediment to such action is Canada's membership in NATO, which keeps insisting that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security. However, a double standard has deeply conflicted NATO. At one and the same time, NATO member states reaffirm their commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty goal of nuclear disarmament and their NATO dependence on nuclear weapons. The policies are incoherent. The continued deployment of US tactical nuclear bombs on the soil of Belgium, Germany,

the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey, though resisted by growing numbers of people in those countries, is a standing provocation to Russia, which is consequently disinclined to lower its own huge numbers of tactical nuclear weapons. Russia is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons while it is virtually surrounded by an expanding NATO.

About 15 years ago, Canada tried to get NATO to change its nuclear policies. When NATO resisted, Canada gave up. But Norway, another NATO country, is a leader in the new humanitarian movement. Why can't Canada give this effort full support?

The humanitarian movement to eliminate nuclear weapons fits in with long-held Canadian values. More than 750 members of the Order of Canada have called on the Canadian government to take a major diplomatic initiative to support the UN Secretary-General's Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament, which centers on a nuclear weapons convention. A motion supporting this was unanimously passed by both the Senate and the House of Commons.

Canada should align itself with the highly respected New Agenda Coalition countries (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and South Africa) and commit itself to achieving "a comprehensive and legally binding framework" to eliminate all nuclear weapons in a defined time period.

It is not NATO but the UN goals that should drive Canada's work for nuclear disarmament.

SUMMARY

A growing number of states are joining a new movement, emphasizing humanitarian law, to create a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons.

Canadian policy is incoherent. On one hand Canada supports NATO doctrine, which continues to maintain that nuclear weapons provide the “supreme guarantee” of security. On the other hand, Canada supports the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which includes important nuclear disarmament obligations.

The humanitarian movement to eliminate nuclear weapons fits in with long-held Canadian values. Canada should join with those states calling for comprehensive negotiations to start now, leading to a legal framework for the verified, irreversible, and enforceable elimination of nuclear weapons.