

Global



As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warns, 'Not since the worst days of the Cold War has the spectre of nuclear weapons cast such a dark shadow.' Photograph courtesy of Commons Wikimedia

Is the abolition of nuclear weapons really an impossible dream?

It's certainly not a task for the faint-hearted. But I think Nelson Mandela got it right when he encouraged humanity to keep moving forward towards peace and justice: 'It always seems impossible until it's done.'

Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—The Nobel Peace Prize committee last week shone a global spotlight on what many consider an impossible dream: the abolition of nuclear weapons. The Norwegian committee awarded the 2024 prize to the Japanese organization, Nihon

Hidankyo, a grassroots movement of atomic bomb survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who call themselves the *hibakusha*. For nearly 80 years, the *hibakusha* have pressed governments to eliminate all nuclear weapons.

What has happened? The nine nuclear weapon states have made nuclear weapons a permanent core of their arsenals. They are all modernizing their nuclear stocks. Nuclear disarmament treaties and negotiations have collapsed. The international legal system is coming apart, and a new nuclear arms race is under way. The dream of nuclear disarmament appears dead.

A few days after the 2024 Nobel announcement, the five permanent members of the Security Council—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China—announced they would meet in New York to cool down nuclear tensions. This is cold comfort, for, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warns, "Not since the worst days of the Cold War has the spectre of nuclear weapons cast such a dark shadow." He demanded that nuclear-armed states, which currently possess 12,121 nuclear weapons, "stop gambling with humanity's future," and honour their commitments and obligations for nuclear disarmament. He listed

the abolition of nuclear weapons as the highest priority in his recently published "New Agenda for Peace."

The nuclear weapon states have made a mockery of their commitments. They all signed on to the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty's provision that comprehensive negotiations toward the elimination of nuclear weapons be pursued, but did nothing. They ignored the 1996 ruling of the International Court of Justice that such negotiations be concluded. Then they objected to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which outlaws possession of nuclear weapons.

The nuclear powers have given the back of their hand to nuclear weapons abolitionists. The U.S. plans to spend \$1.7-trillion over the next 30 years to restock its nuclear fleet. Russia threatens to use its nuclear weapons if Ukraine and its NATO backers fire on Russia's strategic assets. China is expanding its present nuclear stockpile, and aims to have more than 1,000 operable nuclear weapons by 2030. It is all madness.

All the nations of the world collaborated in producing a Pact for the Future at the recent Summit of the Future. The pact said states would "recommit to the goal of the total elimination

of nuclear weapons." However, no specifics were mentioned. The major states have no intention of fulfilling their discredited promises. The hypocrisy is stunning.

Canada had a chance to speak about all this when the UN Disarmament Committee met for its annual session in New York. But the Canadian speech was bereft of any meaningful comment on the dire nuclear predicament humanity faces today.

Why is the prize of a nuclear weapons-free world so hard to achieve? Will the powerful governments always thwart those who see that a perpetual pileup of nuclear weapons will inevitably lead to a humanitarian catastrophe? These questions constantly disturb me.

There have been appeals galore to the Canadian government to step up and work with like-minded nations to replace the doomed military doctrine of nuclear deterrence with concrete plans for common security. But Canada won't move away from the NATO line that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security.

A number of prominent Canadians are trying to break through the wall our government has built around itself. Last year, four major nuclear disarmament groups in Canada convened an

extraordinary roundtable of experts who urged the government to stand up against the intimidation tactics of the nuclear powers. "In the new multi-polar world, which is fraught with confrontation, states must return to the use of trust-building communication to advance mutual security interests," the meeting said.

The experts will meet in Ottawa on Oct. 24 for a second special roundtable to address the growing role of nuclear weapons in world politics, and the risk to human security everywhere. Their report to the government should at least be seriously considered, for it will be signed by experienced Canadian nuclear disarmament leaders, including Robin Collins, Bev Delong, Walter Dorn, Cesar Jaramillo, Firdaus Kharas, Sylvie Lemieux, Peggy Mason, Paul Meyer, Alex Neve, Tariq Rauf, Ernie Regehr, Jennifer Simons and Erika Simpson.

It is a sad truism that appeals to conscience have a hard time being heard amidst today's political clamour. That is why the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the *hibakusha* is so important. The prestige of the Nobel has lifted up the voices of those who have inspired and educated people around the world to the horrors of nuclear war. Their costly experience has been used, as the Nobel committee said, "to cultivate hope and engagement for peace."

Is the abolition of nuclear weapons really an impossible dream? It's certainly not a task for the faint-hearted. But I think Nelson Mandela got it right when he encouraged humanity to keep moving forward towards peace and justice: "It always seems impossible until it's done."

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

The Hill Times