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By Douglas Roche

The huge gap in thinking between the major nuclear weapons powers and a majority of other states on the safety of humanity was on display last week when 146 nations and scores of academics and civil society activists assembled in Nayrit, Mexico to examine the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of the use of nuclear weapons.

For two days, experts hammered home the devastating effects of any nuclear detonation – accidental or deliberate – on virtually every area of human society: health, the economy, environment, food, transportation. There are no facilities anywhere to cope with the staggering human needs following nuclear warfare.

The majority of the world wants a legally binding instrument to ban all nuclear weapons, but work to achieve this is blocked by the US, Russia, China, the UK and France, who possess most of the 17,000 nuclear weapons still in existence. These states, known as the P5 because they are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, boycotted the Nayrit conference as they did a similar event a year ago in Oslo.

The powerful nuclear states adamantly oppose comprehensive negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons. Even humanitarian calls on a scale never seen before in the nearly 70 years since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts killed 200,000 people outright are not moving them. The P5 are giving the back of their hand to the rest of the world.

What should be done?

A movement is building up across the world to go ahead without the nuclear weapons states and start a process in which like-minded states develop a legal instrument containing the requisite legal, technical and political elements. The end result might be a convention or treaty, which would outlaw nuclear weapons. A global norm would be established. Even if the nuclear weapons possessors could not be forced to give up their arsenals, they would be stigmatized in world opinion.

The P5 do not want their nuclear weapons outlawed, and thus they are using their political muscle to prevent the Oslo and Nayrit gatherings from turning talk into action. Their surrogates at these meetings are the NATO states and a few other countries, such as Australia, which fall under the “extended deterrence” policies of the US. On the eve of the conference, the Australian foreign minister, Julie Bishop, scorned the “emotional appeal” of the humanitarian arguments. “Pushing for a ban would divert attention from the sustained, practical steps needed for effective disarmament,” she said. In any event, the global community needs to “engage those countries that have chosen to acquire nuclear weapons and address the security drivers behind their choices.”

Bishop’s argument completely overlooked that non-nuclear states have engaged with the nuclear powers since the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into existence in 1970. The NPT enjoins states to enter into good faith negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons, but scant results have put the NPT in crisis and its survival is at stake. The NPT obligation was reinforced by the International Court of Justice in 1996. The

2010 Review Conference of the NPT made clear that all states have a responsibility to effect nuclear disarmament. Still, there are no comprehensive negotiations, and the US-Russian reductions in their Cold War stocks have been offset by modernization programs that currently have nuclear weapons systems slated to continue well into the second half of the 21st century.

At the Nayrit conference, Australia's opposition was joined by leading NATO states: Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey and Canada. These states fear enraging Washington. India and Pakistan, both of which possess nuclear weapons, attended the conference but expressed skepticism that anything would come of it.

The Western opposition to a global process casts a large shadow over the Oslo-Nayrit efforts. A third humanitarian conference, under the auspices of the government of Austria, is scheduled for Vienna later this year. The clamor for action by the most concerned states and the civil society-driven International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons worries Austria, which feels that a more progressive agenda at the next conference may well scare away the very states needed to ensure a credible international gathering.

The position of Canada in this tug-of-peace is intriguing. In the past, Canada's nuclear disarmament efforts had been steadfast. It was once a world leader in scientific and political work to strengthen disarmament verification techniques. It tried to get NATO to end its dependence on nuclear weapons. It started the "Ottawa Process" of gathering nations together to ban landmines. Now, under the present government, Canada refuses to sign a statement endorsed by 125 nations expressing deep concern

about the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of nuclear weapons and throws cold water on new efforts to get the non-nuclear world community to speak up and start collective action.

In 2010, both the Senate and the House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion calling for world-wide action to ban nuclear weapons. Some 705 members of the Order of Canada have expressly backed such action. Clearly, the government of Canada is thwarting public will. Even an urgent humanitarian appeal is not moving the government. What will?

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*Former Senator Douglas Roche’s new book, Peacemakers: How People Around the World Are Building a World Free of War, will be published in April.*