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By Douglas Roche and Ernie Regehr

There are two ways of looking at the outcome of the month-long Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, which wrapped up last Friday at the United Nations in New York with a standing ovation for its president, Ambassador Libran Cabactulan of the Philippines.

It was a minor diplomatic triumph or it was yet another delay on the long and tortuous road to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Undoubtedly, nuclear disarmament activists will be deeply disappointed that the Final Document does not contain a commitment to immediate negotiations on a time-bound program for comprehensive and verifiable nuclear disarmament. We are in that camp. Yet we recognize that the political divisions in the world are so deep that only minor steps can be taken in a 190-nation forum where consensus is required. Thus progress is agonizingly slow, far too slow considering “the catastrophic humanitarian consequences,” as the conference put it rhetorically, of any detonation of the 23,000 nuclear weapons still in existence.

The fact that the Review Conference put a Nuclear Weapons Convention on the international political agenda for the first time was definitely a progressive step. So was the commitment to convene a conference of all Middle East states in 2012 “on the establishment of a

Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction.”

Those two steps were enough to mark the review conference a success compared to the debacle at the last meeting in 2005 when American intransigence and Egyptian ire collided producing paralysis. Thus Egypt proclaimed this conference a “historic success.” The U.S. said the Final Document “reflects President Obama’s vision.” France said, “It relaunched momentum.” The U.K.: “A breakthrough after a decade of failure.” Canada: “A modest product,” but containing “seeds of hope.” The best characterization of the conference came from Mexico: “While not bringing us to heaven, it does distance us from hell, the hell of nuclear war.”

There are 64 actions listed in the 28-page Final Document, covering an array of measures connected to the NPT’s three pillars: nuclear disarmament, stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and furthering peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

But the passage that will be focused on intensely over the next five-year cycle says: “The Conference notes the Five-Point Proposal for Nuclear Disarmament of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, which proposes *inter alia* consideration of negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or agreement on a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments, backed by a strong system of verification.” Translated to plain English, this means a verifiable global treaty to ban all nuclear weapons is now possible.

This passage is supported by another section, which says: “The Conference affirms that the final phase of the nuclear disarmament process...should be pursued within an agreed legal framework, which a majority of States parties believe should include specified timelines.”

Unfortunately, neither of these references is contained within the action steps, leaving the nuclear weapons states with the ploy that they are not committed to specific action. Moreover, when an earlier draft stated that a Nuclear Weapons Convention “contributes towards the goal,” of a nuclear weapons free world, even this soft affirmation was removed as the result of a frontal attack by the U.S., Russia, the U.K. and France, all of whom united in gutting earlier drafts of decisive action steps. The nuclear weapons states stoutly stood together in removing a condemnation of nuclear weapons modernization and a call for the closing of all nuclear test sites.

Nuclear weapons states have through the years resisted the “good faith” negotiations on disarmament that are required of them under the NPT’s Article VI. So it is legitimate to question their “good faith” regarding the basic pledge coming out of the 2010 conference: “to seek a safer world for all and to achieve the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” That may be the Obama agenda, but one would never know it by watching his officials in action.

The nuclear weapons states will, of course, be central players in the 2012 Middle East conference and it doubtless would not have even been agreed upon without the approval of President Obama. Israel will have a hard time maintaining credibility if it refuses to participate in the

2012 conference, the terms of reference of which are the NPT's 1995 resolution on the Middle East, which calls for a zone free of nuclear weapons as a way to strengthen the Middle East peace process. For its part, Iran set out an 11-point plan at the conference for "the complete elimination of nuclear weapons within a specified timetable." The Israel-Iran showdown on the possession of nuclear weapons looms.

Since India, Pakistan and Israel, which all possess nuclear weapons, shun the NPT, a new legal framework that is truly global is desperately needed to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. That, in fact, is where the Middle East question and a Nuclear Weapons Convention are linked. A successful Middle East conference may pave the way to global action beyond the NPT. The situation is urgent, but the process torpid..

Canada made a modest effort to strengthen the institutional machinery of the NPT, a worthy goal considering that there is not even a home office for the world's most important arms control and disarmament treaty, but the biggest opponent of this reform was – the U.S. The end result was the approval of a dedicated staff officer to organize NPT meetings. A significant Canadian contribution was the presentation to Ambassador Cabactulan, the conference president, of the signatures of 515 members of the Order of Canada calling for work to begin on a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Ambassador Cabactulan called this action "meaningful input."

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