

Embassy/10th Anniversary Issue

By Douglas Roche

Will the next ten years bring us to a nuclear weapons-free world? My answer is that we will be closer to that goal if nuclear disarmament campaigners do not lose their courage. History is moving in the direction of nuclear abolition.

The “realist” school of foreign affairs will reject my thesis. They consider the elimination of nuclear weapons to be a hopeless case. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has been paralyzed for many years. The Non-Proliferation Treaty is in crisis. The major nuclear weapons states refuse to enter into comprehensive negotiations for nuclear disarmament and are even boycotting international meetings designed to put world attention on the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of the use of nuclear weapons. Not a cheery outlook.

However, driven forward by science and technology and a new understanding of the inherency of human rights, an integration of humanity is occurring. Not only do we know one another across what used to be great divides, but we also know that we need one another for common survival. There is a new caring for the human condition and the state of the planet evident in such programs as the Millennium Development Goals.

This is the awakening of a global conscience. An emerging ethic of human rights and planetary stewardship stems from the global conscience. Such a development in human thinking – leading huge numbers of people to reject war as a means of resolving conflict – is a giant step forward in human

inter-action. The higher level of thinking is bringing a new potency to the nuclear disarmament debate.

Increasingly, nuclear weapons are seen not as instruments of state security but as violators of human security and have even been described by the former president of the International Court of Justice, Mohammed Bedajoui, as “the ultimate evil.”

Earlier this year, I went to Nayarit, Mexico, to attend a conference of 146 nations on 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 Nayarit meeting followed a similar gathering of states in Oslo last year; a third meeting to examine the unacceptable humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons is planned for Vienna later this year.

In 2008, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon suggested that the international community start work on a Nuclear Weapons Convention. This would be a treaty banning the production as well as deployment of nuclear weapons. A group of civil society leaders had produced a model convention in the late 1990s and it subsequently became a UN document.

Ban Ki-moon’s support led to a series of resolutions in the UN’s Disarmament Committee, which showed widespread support for the idea. More than three-quarters of the countries of the world have already voted to commence negotiations leading to the conclusion of a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Support comes from across the geo-political spectrum, including from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Europe, and includes support from some of the countries possessing nuclear weapons, including China, India, Pakistan and North Korea. Nations supporting a ban

make up 81 percent of the world's population.

The nuclear weapons states are still strongly resisting the growing demand that they fulfil their responsibilities to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and start negotiating nuclear elimination. Thus, we continue to live in a two-class world in which the powerful aggrandize unto themselves the continued possession of nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by other states. This “nuclear apartheid” policy is proving to be not viable in the 21st century.

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. It might well take more than ten years for this movement to mature and actually produce a convention outlawing nuclear weapons. But just the process of working on this will raise the global norm against nuclear weapons. Even if the nuclear weapons possessors could not be immediately forced to give up their arsenals, they would be stigmatized in world opinion.

Canada, which used to be a leader in nuclear disarmament efforts, needs to recover its commitment to the issue. The organization Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, now with 750 members of the Order of Canada backing it, intends to keep pressing the government over the next ten years.

This brings us back to the courage of the campaigners not to lose heart in the face of the nuclear states' adamancy. These campaigners are the tip of an iceberg of civil society organizations often working with the UN in building new institutions for peace. The International Criminal Court and anti-genocide prevention are but two examples.

The character of the modern horizontal world gives a new power to civil society, with thousands, perhaps hundred of thousands, of persons playing key leadership roles in diverse areas of human activity. Measuring leadership is not as simple as it once was. For the interweaving complexities of modern economic, social, and political problems all but rule out the old idea that one or two dynamic political leaders would be enough to bring peace. In today's world, international cooperation has been elevated from a pleasant attribute to a necessity in the joint search for not only equitability but the survival of the planet itself. The 2012 Earth Summit, in which 178 governments participated along with 2,400 representatives of non-governmental organizations, demonstrated the inter-action of people and governments at all levels necessary to deal with the massive problems of sustainable development.

In 2009, President Obama famously set out “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” – quickly adding that the goal would perhaps not be reached in his lifetime. A growing list of humanitarian, environmental, human rights, peace, and development organizations are mobilizing now and not waiting for some far-off period. In the next ten years, they might reach a critical mass of publics around the world, and if they do, they may yet move the levers of power to a further rejection of militarism.

Former Senator Douglas Roche’s latest book is Peacemakers: How People Around the World Are Building a World Free of War (Lorimer).

