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By Douglas Roche

Two events have coincided to give the Canadian government a powerful opportunity to play a key role in the growing effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Both the Senate and House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion calling on the government “to deploy a major world-wide Canadian diplomatic initiative” for nuclear disarmament. A new draft resolution, now circulating among governments, calls on Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to convene a diplomatic conference in 2014 to start negotiating a legal ban on nuclear weapons, and a project by 550 members of the Order of Canada wants the Canadian government to host a preparatory meeting in Ottawa in 2012 to begin the process.

What would such a preparatory meeting do?

US President Barack Obama has set out the vision of a nuclear weapons free world. Ban Ki-moon has pointed to a Nuclear Weapons Convention, which would be an enforceable global treaty, as the instrument to implement the vision. A convention could be negotiated outright, or the goal of prohibiting nuclear weapons might be reached by building a framework linking several measures, such as a ban on testing and a ban on the production of fissile material, into one legal instrument.

A preparatory meeting in 2012 would examine the legal, technical and political requisites for a nuclear weapons free world. These include issues of verification, compliance and enforcement, controls on nuclear facilities, and individual responsibility. An agenda for both substance and procedure would be developed.

On substance, these measures would be identified for action:

- an undertaking not to be the first to use nuclear weapons;
- an assurance to non-nuclear weapon states that nuclear weapons will never be used against them;
- an end to the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes;
- an end to all nuclear testing;
- an end to the production of new nuclear weapons;
- a schedule for all states progressively to engage in nuclear disarmament.

On procedure, the meeting would seek agreement on how to develop and codify these elements and whether they should be put in the framework of mutually reinforcing instruments or whether one whole Nuclear Weapons Convention should be constructed.

What is especially needed from this first meeting is agreement that these topics are apposite and lead to shutting the gate on any further production and use of nuclear weapons and opening the gate to their elimination.

After an opening plenary, the meeting would split into working groups on the various topics drawing up the terms of reference for technical papers to be prepared later by experts under a mandate

from the Secretary-General. A second preparatory meeting a year later would examine the papers and start drafting texts for presentation to the diplomatic conference in 2014.

This consultative approach would, in essence, put a central focus on the end result of elimination. Until now, nuclear disarmament has consisted of disconnected steps without an end goal – which is why there are still more than 22,000 nuclear weapons held by nine states and the threat of proliferation grows constantly.

“It’s time to refuse to accept any more temporizing assurances by nuclear weapons states that they mean well and they’ll do better next year,” says Ambassador Richard Butler, Chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative, which drew up the draft resolution. “The time is upon us now. If we do not consign nuclear weapons to history, new wars will be found to justify their continued existence.”

Butler, an Australian who led the way in having the UN adopt the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, believes a new negotiating process is essential for nuclear weapons. The 65-nation Conference on Disarmament, headquartered in Geneva, has been deadlocked for more than decade as a result of the consensus rule in which one state can and does block the progress desired by others. It has not even been able to start a dedicated discussion on nuclear disarmament. Canadian Ambassador Marius Grinius, who chaired the Conference in January, calls the body “an oblivious island of inactivity” devoid of political will. Similarly, review meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have been too timid; moreover, the treaty does not include India, Pakistan and Israel, three nuclear weapons states. When

President Obama convened his Washington summit last year, he specifically included the three states.

“If Canada can seize this moment and start the ball rolling, it will be doing a superb service to the world,” says Butler.

With solid credentials in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, NATO, La Francophonie, the Commonwealth as well as trusted relationships with the US, the UK and France, Canada is instrumentally placed to play a role in hosting an initial meeting. It was this kind of Canadian government invitation to governments to come to Ottawa in 1996 that led to the Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty.

Since President Obama himself is such an ardent advocate of a nuclear weapons free world, it is highly likely the US would attend a preparatory meeting in Ottawa. China has already voted at the UN for negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention to begin and would likely attend. The UK is moving in this direction. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has committed his country to global negotiations. Within NATO, Germany and Norway are calling for stronger nuclear disarmament measures. Austria and Switzerland have explicitly called for a start on a convention. The New Agenda Coalition countries – Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden – are deeply committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Canadian government naturally would want “good company” for a meeting in Ottawa. The chances are excellent that it would be proud of the guest list. Working with Ban Ki-moon to bring governments to Ottawa to start work on the foremost security issue

in the world would be a brilliant act.

For many years, nuclear disarmament has been a desultory process, doing little to stir public imagination. But now an attractive and single-focused idea – a Nuclear Weapons Convention – is here. It provides the way to rid the world of all nuclear weapons in a safe and secure way. And Canadian hospitality can lead the way.

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