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Canadian Church Leaders in Political Mode

By Douglas Roche

The Trump administration has suspended participation in the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Russia's Putin has retaliated with similar action, and the modernization of nuclear weapons races ahead. We are witnessing nuclear brinkmanship, a horror that we thought the end of the Cold War buried. Who can stop this madness?

The fact that Canada signed onto a NATO statement supporting Trump's withdrawal from the INF is shocking. Canada's inexplicable public silence in the face of the U.S.-Russian standoff is a further sign that Canada seems oblivious to the disintegration of the current arms control regime.

The U.S. government's lack of interest in renewing the New Start Treaty, which curbs long-range missiles, adds to the high level of danger in the world today.

The paucity of public debate over the unravelling of the architecture of nuclear security aided and abetted by NATO is startling.

Surprisingly, a strong moral voice has now been raised. The Christian churches of Canada — all of them — have denounced NATO's nuclear deterrence doctrine for “effectively legitimizing the stockpiling and potential use of nuclear weapons.”

All 26 member denominations of the Canadian Council of Churches joined together in a vigorous letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau demanding that Canada use its prerogative to push NATO for new policies “that do not rely on the

threat of nuclear annihilation.” They urged the Trudeau government to sign and ratify the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

There can be no doubt that this is a “political” story, not just a “religious” one, especially considering the churches represent at least 20 million Canadians. The religious leaders want to meet with the Prime Minister on this subject, which is at the centre of world politics. Will Mr. Trudeau deny a meeting with them in an election year? So far no answer.

The participation of Canada’s Catholic bishops gives extra weight to the ecumenical statement. Never before have the Catholic bishops so strongly condemned not only the nuclear arms race in general but the nuclear deterrence policies of NATO, which they criticize for “delaying the goal of complete nuclear disarmament while diverting money that could be used for other programs.”

The statement is also noteworthy because, in it, the Catholic bishops have aligned themselves with Pope Francis, who said last year: “The threat of [nuclear weapons’] use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned.” This sentence is quoted in the letter along with Francis’s criticism that nuclear weapons “exist in the service of a mentality of fear that affects not only the parties in conflict but the entire human race.”

Francis’s condemnation is a direct challenge to the nuclear weapons states and their nuclear allies which, of course includes Canada as a NATO member. Unfortunately, the Canadian government is rejecting the new treaty, which outlaws possession and has caused an upheaval in international debate on the future of nuclear weapons.

No previous arms control or disarmament treaty has gone as far as the Prohibition Treaty, which, in its centre-piece, states: “Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances to: develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

The treaty, which U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called “historic,” will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it (so far 20 have).

The nuclear weapons states vehemently reject it on the spurious grounds that it won’t actually eliminate nuclear weapons, and the international community should stick with the “step-by-step” approach. Actually, this piecemeal approach has led to paralysis in nuclear disarmament, crippled the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and resulted in the modernization of the big powers’ nuclear arsenals.

An uplifting of the debate so that people understand the moral and catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear warfare is desperately needed. Pope Francis and the World Council of Churches have supplied the moral arguments.

Now the Canadian Council of Churches has raised its moral voice and plunged into the political arena with its searing attack on NATO’s policies. Twenty years ago, the Canadian government tried to move NATO off its insistence that nuclear weapons are the “supreme guarantee” of security. But Canada was brushed aside.

When the Prohibition Treaty was developed in 2017, the Canadian Pugwash movement tried to shore up Canada’s courage by asking the Canadian government to, once again, work with NATO to change its nuclear policies, which would then enable NATO countries to support, in good faith, the Prohibition Treaty. But the pressure from Washington on all NATO countries to hold the line has been enormous.

The Canadian government is caught up in one crisis after another involving the U.S. government, and nobody knows where the Trump administration is headed. Meanwhile, the U.N. Secretary-General has warned the world of the consequences of the present “severe crisis” in nuclear disarmament.

Canadian religious leaders have stepped into the political arena to be heard.
Will the government listen?

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