

Toward a Legal Ban on All Nuclear Weapons

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Address to UN Book Launch: *How We Stopped Loving the Bomb*

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I would like to thank Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, the Holy See's Permanent Representative to the UN, for convening this panel discussion and for the support he has given my work.

Two world leaders, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and U.S. President Barack Obama, have taken nuclear disarmament actions to a higher level than the world has ever before seen.

The Secretary-General's Five-Point Proposal for Nuclear Disarmament, issued October 24, 2008 put the international spotlight on a Nuclear Weapons Convention, and his commitment to moving the diplomatic process forward is evident. "Nuclear disarmament," he said, "is not a distant unattainable dream. It is an urgent necessity, here and now. We are determined to achieve it." Negotiations, he added, "are long overdue."

President Obama, on his forty-fourth day in office, April 5, 2009, proclaimed “America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” and followed up by convening an unprecedented Summit of the Security Council on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. He held a further 47-nation Summit in Washington on nuclear dangers and spent considerable political capital in obtaining the Senate ratification of the new START Treaty.

Both leaders have energized the new political dialogue on a global legal ban on all nuclear weapons. Such a ban is sometimes called a Nuclear Weapons Convention, or a framework of mutually reinforcing instruments. Either route should be designed to arrive at the same point: a legally enforceable, verifiable, irreversible ban on all nuclear weapons.

Despite the great prestige of their offices, neither the Secretary-General nor the President can, by wish or command, make this happen overnight. Systemic inertia, not to mention opposition, is still formidable. They need the active support of governments, parliamentarians, civil society leaders, and even, I dare say, of humble authors, all of whom must keep advancing these ideas in public discourse so that the growing movement to free the world of nuclear Armageddon becomes unstoppable just as

the movements to end slavery, colonialism and apartheid became unstoppable when society made its demands clear.

Historic change does not come easily.

Although the language in the Final Document of the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference is weak, a breakthrough has still been made. For the first time, all states, nuclear as well as non-nuclear, have agreed to put the subject of a nuclear weapons ban on the international agenda.

The pressure of world opinion has brought us to this point. At the UN, two-thirds of all national governments have voted in favour of negotiating a nuclear weapons convention. In twenty-one countries, including the five major nuclear powers, polls show that seventy-six per cent of people support the negotiation of a ban. Religious leaders have long voiced objection to the immorality of nuclear deterrence as a permanent military posture. The European Parliament has voted for a convention, along with a number of national parliaments. Mayors for Peace, comprising more than four thousand cities around the world, is campaigning for it. Long lists of non-governmental organizations want it. In Japan, fourteen million people signed a petition for it. The UN Secretary-General has gone out on a limb for it. There is no doubt that historical momentum is building up.

But the opposition is still strong. Nuclear weapons are about power, and governments have never given up that which they perceive

as giving them strength. The powerful military-industrial complexes are still trading on a fear that has been driven into the public. There is virtually a mainline-media blackout on the subject, which makes it all the harder to have national debates. Yet, despite these obstacles, the tide is turning. The strong opposition to a convention at the Non-Proliferation Treaty meeting by a powerful few shows that the idea is no longer ignored, but has entered the mainstream of governmental thinking. Having come this far, the promoters of a convention will not cease their efforts. The campaign has already shifted from arguing that a convention would be a good thing to figuring out how to actually start negotiations.

Opponents of a convention or legal framework claim there must first be a series of incremental steps before a comprehensive negotiation can take place. Here is my response.

In forty years' working in this field, I have learned one overwhelming fact: confining nuclear disarmament to a series of incremental steps will never achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons. Proponents of the step-by-step approach see elimination only as an "eventual" goal. But this approach is a trap for the world. Despite incremental steps, modernization programs by the nuclear weapons states drive forward the nuclear arms race, and keep "eventual" so far over the horizon as to be meaningless. In retaining "eventual," nuclear defenders will so solidify the

justification for nuclear weapons that proliferation to more states is bound to occur, and the more proliferation in the years and decades ahead the harder it will be even to claim that nuclear disarmament has legitimacy. The double standard of trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons while allowing the nuclear powers to retain their guarantees that nuclear disarmament will always be but a dream.

A clearly defined goal must be set – and that is what a Nuclear Weapons Convention does. It is urgent to move beyond “eventual” and give the world a precise plan for the construction of a legal ban on all nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear weapons attack obliterates a city before starting negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

I refuse to wait until a nuclear explosion causes international panic through the killing of millions and the shutdown of food, water, medical and transportation systems.

I refuse to wait until cooperative world politics breaks down completely under the weight of nuclear weapons hegemony.

A Nuclear Weapons Convention is attractive because it is a single-focused idea that would get rid of all nuclear weapons in a safe and secure way. It provides a legal basis for phasing in concrete steps with a visible intent to reach zero nuclear weapons

in a defined time period. The public can easily understand such a clear notion.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and President Obama have provided us with a window of opportunity. The 21st century development of the planet demands that we not lose this moment.