

The Humanitarian Movement to End Nuclear Weapons

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When the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred in August, the attention of the world was drawn, as it usually is on the commemoration day, to the indescribable pain and suffering of that time, which seems so long ago. Once more, the *hibakusha* made their plea, “Never again!” And again, the poignancy of the moment drifted off with the daily headlines.

The headlines, insofar as nuclear matters are concerned, are occupied with the landmark agreement between the most powerful nations in the world and Iran to foreclose the possibility of Iran developing a nuclear weapon. The agreement is by far the best route to preventing Iran from joining the nuclear club and should be supported by every government in the world. But the acrimonious debate over its effectiveness shows us how far the nuclear disarmament movement has yet to go to reach its goal.

Limiting the debate to Iran misses the point the *hibakusha* are trying to make: no one should possess nuclear weapons because they are instruments of evil. Yet the five permanent members of the Security Council all possess nuclear weapons. So do India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. All told, there are 15,850 nuclear weapons in the world, virtually all of them many times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is what decision-

makers ought to be focusing on, especially the 1,800 nuclear weapons the United States and Russia still keep in a state of high operational alert.

Why do the political and media opinion-makers fixate on Iran, which does not have even one nuclear weapon, yet close their eyes to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of any one of the existing nuclear weapons?

This question gets to the heart of the duplicity that envelops the whole nuclear weapons issue. The major powers act as if they have a right to nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by anyone else. Nuclear weapons have become instruments of power. In one of the greatest political deceptions ever concocted, the proponents of nuclear weapons – eg, all the NATO states – have managed to convince the public that nuclear weapons are the guarantee of peace. NATO's military strategy is premised on this belief: "The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States." The other principal nuclear states, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China, along with the U.S., are all modernizing their nuclear arsenals. They show not the slightest sign of getting rid of their core military doctrine of nuclear deterrence.

About 150 nations are vigorously opposed to this nuclear hegemony and hold that nuclear weapons, in addition to being inherently inhumane, have created a less secure world through the risks of massive destruction, of which Hiroshima and Nagasaki were but a foretaste. These nations agree that any use of nuclear weapons would have systemic and potentially irreversible consequences on health, environment, infrastructure, food security, climate, development, social cohesion, and the global economy. Here is their doleful assessment: There is no

existing national or international response capacity that would adequately respond to the human suffering and humanitarian harm resulting from a nuclear weapon explosion in a populated area. There is no prospect such capacity will ever exist.

The two sides are diametrically opposed, even though the nuclear weapons possessors pay lip service to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Three-quarters of the nations of the world want a Nuclear Weapons Convention, which would be a global treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. Most of the nuclear powers are adamantly opposed. They hold that a “step-by-step” approach to disarmament is sufficient, ignoring the fact that for seventy years “step-by-step” has utterly failed to stop the qualitative development of nuclear weapons. The reduction in numbers of U.S. and Russian superfluous nuclear weapons while the development of new systems continues has led the public into a state of complacency.

It is ironic, perhaps I should say incomprehensible, that just at the time when human civilization has discovered the full agenda of human rights, centering principally on the right to life, the greatest weapon of mass destruction ever conceived should be tolerated in terrifying numbers. The contradiction between the abundance of life promised by scientific and technological developments and the threat of utter devastation of the planet is mystifying. One wants to cry out to the legal profession, the medical community, the religious assemblies, the education systems to raise their voices against such an affront to human reason. But these voices are muted. The public is unmoved. And the corridors of power remain occupied by politicians and officials who defy the mathematical probability that the longer nuclear weapons remain in existence the greater the chance they will be used.

Despite the prediction of security experts that it is only a question of time until terrorists acquire a nuclear device and set it off in a metropolitan area, the lethargy to address the abolition of all nuclear weapons persists. Measures are taken to secure nuclear materials and prevent their transfer, but the number of near accidents, involving the supposed security of nuclear weapons, gives us no assurance that a calamity will not unfold at any time.

Thwarted by the recalcitrance of the nuclear powers, a combination of influential non-nuclear weapons states and civil society leaders have mounted a humanitarian movement that has become a new source of hope that sanity may be regained. Over the past three years, they have opened a path for more than 150 states to participate in a series of international conferences (held in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna), which detailed at length the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of the use of nuclear weapons. The government of Austria, which hosted the third of these meetings, said: “The overwhelming call by the international community for urgent progress towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons as the only way to avoid the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons is a fact that must be acknowledged.”

Austria authored a Humanitarian Pledge, now signed by 114 states, “to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons...” The recent review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty – the centre-piece of which is the commitment by all 189 states parties to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons – moved in this direction. The NPT draft final document called for a new working group to identify “legal provisions” to contribute to a nuclear weapons-free world. Unfortunately, the final document was not approved because it was caught up in a dispute over holding an international conference to make the Middle East a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The Middle East

intransigence is itself a demonstration of the ineffectiveness of the piece-meal approach to nuclear disarmament.

The result of all this is that the “step-by-step” charade and regional disputes, compounded by the current deterioration in relations between the U.S. and Russia, have brought nuclear disarmament to a standstill. The humanitarian movement is trying to break through the impasse, and it is likely we will see a working group created at the United Nations this fall to start discussions on a legal route to the elimination of nuclear weapons. This approach can be productive because it brings to mind that humanitarian law has for centuries condemned the use of weapons that cause unnecessary suffering. Judge Christopher Weeramantry, former vice-president of the International Court of Justice, holds: “Nuclear weapons contradict every principle of humanitarian law, every principle of international law and every principle of religious teaching.” Dialogue on this point may help to put their illegality beyond dispute.

So far, no country is willing to take a leadership role by calling a conference to start the actual drafting of a global law against nuclear weapons. The non-nuclear weapons states are so cowed by the heavyweights that they refuse to stand up to them in the international arena. When was the last time the leaders of leading non-nuclear states actually went together to Washington and Moscow and demanded, in the name of humanity and sustainable development for all peoples, that nuclear weapons be entirely eliminated by law?

The humanitarian movement challenges public lethargy and institutional obstruction – and, of course, the grasping greed of the military-industrial complex, which will benefit from the \$348 billion the U.S. will spend on nuclear weapons in the next decade, not to mention the immense sums the other nuclear powers will divert from economic and social needs to instruments of death.

The essential question – can nuclear weapons actually be eliminated? – perplexes the best of minds. If we take a short-term view, the answer most likely is no. But if we look at the sweep of history and examine how humanity has benefited from building institutions of peace – starting with the United Nations and the body of international law that now governs a host of finance, trade and security issues and is now tackling the curbing of global warming – we can start to see rays of hope. After all, how much longer can the international system bear the dichotomy of acceding to conventions that ban chemical and biological weapons while failing to place the worst form of weapons of mass destruction under a similar global embargo? The intellectual assessment of nuclear weapons as an impediment to the continued development of life on the planet ought not to be discounted, especially considering the possibility that future generations may well take a more enlightened view.

Nor should the possibility be discounted that the voices of morality will finally be heard in the public square. After all, nuclear weapons are the ultimate evil and it is the business of moralists to attack evil. Who better than spiritual leaders to awaken the moral consciousness of humanity? The development of a global ethic is already under way in the rising global consciousness of human rights and the well-being of the planet. By “global ethic,” I do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion. Rather, I mean a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes. This ethic is the expression of a vision of peoples living together peacefully, or at least non-violently, and of national and ethnic groupings of people sharing responsibility for the care of the planet. The abolition of nuclear weapons may, in time, become a central part of this new global ethic of enlightened realism.

A global ethic, while essential for long-range peace, may be deemed too difficult to attain in our still fractious 21st century. But the humanitarian

movement, based on our new understanding of human rights and wider implementation of existing humanitarian law, offers an immediate prospect for, at the very least, putting world pressure on the nuclear powers, which have hitherto been successful at prioritizing state security over human security. In other words, the need for human security may yet overcome the militarist thinking that still insists nuclear weapons are the route to peace.

The new humanitarian effort follows in the line of the great social movements, which were responsible for the end of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. Usually, the beginnings of social movements are ignored by establishment thinking, then vigorously opposed before at last becoming a basis for a new social order. To be effective, a social movement needs a clear-cut goal. When independence came to India in 1948, when civil rights legislation passed in the U.S. in 1964, when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, when apartheid in South Africa gave way in 1993 to demands for freedom – all these accomplishments were made possible because demanding publics had a definable goal. Rising public opinion coalesced behind a leader – Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela – and the social movements became unstoppable.

The humanitarian effort to eliminate nuclear weapons needs a definable goal – and that goal is a global legal framework to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons. For the last several years, a model Nuclear Weapons Convention, drafted by civil society experts, has had the status of a U.N. document. Three-quarters of the nations of the world have voted at the U.N. to commence negotiations to achieve such a global treaty. However, the powerful nuclear states will not budge.

In their frustration, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), whose 400 partner organizations reach into 95 countries, has proposed that like-minded states start their own negotiations for a treaty to “ban” nuclear

weapons even though such a treaty would not be binding on the nuclear states. They argue that such action would stigmatize nuclear weapons and act as a lever to press the nuclear weapons states to join in active negotiations for a full-fledged Nuclear Weapons Convention.

My own view is that, given the call of history to abolish nuclear weapons before they abolish us, negotiations for a limited ban treaty could be a useful political strategy to de-legitimize nuclear weapons and be a foundation stone for a convention. Building an architecture to support a global law against nuclear weapons requires much work by the international community, but there is no doubt that a sincere and concerted effort to eliminate nuclear weapons would be a cornerstone in building a world of peace.

The new humanitarian movement to free the world of nuclear weapons coincides with work now going on at the U.N. Human Rights Council to define and implement the right to peace. The time has come to insist, through formal structures, that everyone is entitled to enjoy peace and security, human rights and development. Our society, through its political and legal instruments, should not only respect but promote the rule of law, equality and non-discrimination. This visionary approach to peace gives us hope that a strengthened society may clear a legal path to a world without nuclear weapons.