

C A N A D A ' S N A T I O N A L N E W S P A P E R

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Canada reviewing nuclear-weapons policy

Reappraisal sparked by rulings that nuclear arms are illegal and threat they pose to humanity is intolerable

BY JEFF SALLOT
Parliamentary Bureau

OTTAWA — The federal government is reviewing its nuclear-weapons policy in light of a World Court judgment that casts doubt on the legality of using these “weapons of mass destruction.”

Canada does not have nuclear weapons of its own, but is protected by the powerful nuclear arsenal of the United States through membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Canada also participates in U.S. nuclear defence as a partner in NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defence Command, which controls a network of radar stations in Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy initiated the policy review by referring the issues of nuclear weapons and membership in NATO to the Commons-foreign affairs committee.

Mr. Axworthy said the committee will examine fundamental questions such as whether Canada should continue to rely on U.S. nuclear weapons as part of its own defence policy.

This may be the first review of its kind by a NATO country since the World Court judgment last August.

Allies need not fear that the review is a prelude to Canada's unilateral withdrawal from NATO, Mr. Axworthy said. “At the moment we are committed to NATO,” he said in an interview.

But he said that it may be a good time for all NATO countries to review nuclear-weapons questions because of the World Court ruling and a recent anti-nuclear report by a blue-ribbon panel of international experts sponsored by the Australian government.

The Canberra Commission, as the panel is known, had a number of appealing recommendations about what can be done in the short term to generate some momentum for disarmament, Mr. Axworthy said.

The commission said that nuclear weapons are an intolerable threat to humanity and that the nuclear powers should commit themselves unequivocally to their elimination. The idea that nuclear weapons “can be retained in perpetuity and never used — acci-

dentally or by decision — defies credibility,” the commission said.

As an early step, the nuclear states should physically separate warheads from missile launchers to make it more difficult to bring the weapons' systems to alert status, the commission said.

Mr. Axworthy wants the Commons committee to also consider a new report by the Canadian group Project Ploughshares and Douglas Roche, Ottawa's former disarmament ambassador. Mr. Roche, a former Progressive Conservative MP and former chairman of the UN disarmament committee, has just completed a round of national consultations that suggests strong support for the idea of abolishing nuclear weapons.

The World Court, in an advisory judgment, said the use or threat of nuclear weapons is generally illegal in international law. A majority of the jurists, however, could not agree on whether there is an exception when a country uses nuclear weapons to protect itself from being annihilated.

The World Court, however, said

countries are obliged in international law to negotiate nuclear-disarmament treaties.

Although the ruling is not binding on the nuclear powers, it is an important political victory for disarmament groups and peace activists in their efforts to get governments to abandon nuclear weapons, Mr. Roche said.

Mr. Axworthy's decision to refer the issue to the Commons committee may help shore up support for nuclear disarmament in other NATO countries, including the United States, Mr. Roche said in an interview.

In the past, Canada has sided with the United States and NATO's other two nuclear powers — Britain and France — to defeat nuclear-disarmament resolutions at the United Nations. Another nuclear-disarmament resolution comes up for a vote at UN headquarters later this month.

The resolution, sponsored by Malaysia, calls for negotiations to begin next year for a global treaty to ultimately abolish nuclear weapons. The Canadian government has not yet decided how it will vote on the resolution.

Mr. Roche said Canada should sup-

port it, but might abstain until the parliamentary committee completes its work. Committee hearings might generate enough public interest in the issue that it would be easier for the Liberal government to follow its instincts and push for nuclear disarmament within NATO, he said.

Committee chairman Bill Graham, a Toronto Liberal MP, said hearings could begin in the new year after the committee completes a report on Arctic issues.

The nuclear-weapons issue “is a pretty big and pretty important piece of work and we'll want to spend some time with it,” Mr. Graham said in a telephone interview from St. Petersburg, Russia.

Since the breakup of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and the crumbling of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO has reduced the importance of nuclear weapons in its basic defence doctrine.

Nevertheless, NATO doctrine states that “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies continues to be provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States.”