

Norway Hosts Fresh Push For A Nuclear Weapon-Free World

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In snowy Oslo in the first week of March 2013, we witnessed the most exciting breakthrough since 1996 in the struggle for a nuclear weapon-free world. It was inspired by a vigorous new Australia-initiated citizen movement, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), with 300 partner organisations in 70 countries (www.icanw.org). ICAN invited Rob to speak about his book *Security Without Nuclear Deterrence** – on his experience as a former operator of British nuclear weapons turned anti-nuclear campaigner – on an authors' panel at a Civil Society Forum, in the run-up to an unprecedented two-day government conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, hosted by the Norwegian government. *Reviewed by Doug Craig in Peace Researcher 41, July 2011, <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/pr/41/pr41-009.htm> Ed.

From the moment we arrived in the Oslo University Students' Society building, the Forum venue, we sensed fresh energy and anticipation in the already bracing air. At least a third of the 500 delegates from 70 countries were young and new to the nuclear disarmament struggle, most of them sporting scarlet ICAN t-shirts. The first plenary session opened with a lyrical warm-up by a beautiful young black South African poet and singer, Naima McLean; and we were repeatedly surprised and delighted by the youth, vigour, competence and global spread in ethnicity and gender of compères and speakers.

The authors' panel was facilitated by young mother Stine Rødmyr, Chair of the Norwegian equivalent of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Nei til Atomvapen (No Nuclear Weapons). Also on the panel was American historian Ward Wilson, a refreshingly feisty iconoclast speaking about his new book "5 Myths About Nuclear Weapons". As well, young Norwegian author Anne Thelle discussed her experience of growing up in Japan and writing recently about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear atrocities. During more than an hour of lively discussion with a big and knowledgeable audience, Rob explained why he had concluded that the dogma of nuclear deterrence is not just a myth, but a deliberate hoax concocted by the US military-industrial complex now dominating and distorting American politics and foreign policy for its vested interests. He also pointed out that the nuclear weapon states are in denial about the economic, agricultural and health effects of a failure of nuclear deterrence – which is why this conference was so important.

Most Unusual Buzz

At a hugely successful evening gala event, the American film star Martin Sheen – the US President in the *West Wing* TV series – recounted his experience of being in India during the making of the movie "Gandhi", which awakened his faith. He delighted his 900-strong audience when he quipped: "If Gandhi and Martin Luther King were still alive, they would have joined ICAN!" Sheen had met Dan and Phil Berrigan, the famous American Catholic priests and peace activists, who pushed him to work publicly for peace. This took him to a protest in the Nevada desert, where he watched a line of nuns dance their way onto the US nuclear test site and get arrested. He said: "Their courage helped me to live my Christian faith"; and he went on to be arrested scores of times himself. The audience were enthralled when Sheen hugged Karipbek Kuyukov, an armless Kazakhstan artist and second generation victim of Soviet nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk, who was introduced to him. An extraordinary exhibition of Kuyukov's paintings, painted with his feet, was on display outside the conference hall of the government conference.

As delegations from some 130 states assembled in the huge hotel conference room, there was a most unusual buzz for a nuclear disarmament conference. It reminded us of the opening of the 1995 Oral Proceedings at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, when the Court heard submissions on whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons was permissible under international humanitarian law – the only time so far that the nuclear weapon states had been obliged to try to justify the legality of their nuclear policies. When Norway's Foreign Minister, Espen Barth Eide, welcomed delegates, he was building on Norway's courageous leadership in the successful campaigns to negotiate global treaties banning and eliminating other inhumane weapons: anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. Of the nuclear weapon states, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – known as the P5 – were conspicuous by their absence; but India and Pakistan sent delegations.

"Prevention Is The Only Way Forward"

What we found so thrilling was the leading role played by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In his opening address the ICRC President, Peter Maurer, said it was astounding that states had never before come together to address the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, including their long-term health and climatic effects. As he spoke of this “unique and historic opportunity”, we noticed a smiling young pregnant woman delegate nearby in the audience gently stroke her belly. Maurer boldly set the pace by reporting that the ICRC had recently concluded from a specially commissioned study that no national or international capability existed to help survivors of even a single nuclear weapon detonation. This was why, he declared: “prevention – including development of a legally binding treaty to prohibit and eliminate such weapons – is the only way forward”.

Hard-hitting presentations followed from a range of top international experts. Admitting a “perfect identity of view with the ICRC”, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, warned that the international community was not prepared for the evacuation crisis alone from a nuclear detonation. Liv Tørres, Secretary-General of Norwegian People’s Aid (analogous to Oxfam), sounded like an anti-nuclear activist when she said how proud she was that her Government was hosting the event. She added: “We have hesitated too long. The nuclear weapon states’ denial is not good enough. The time has come for a new beginning and action. A new, impressive post-Cold War generation is taking part, which should give us confidence. We are many, determined, and convinced about a solution”.

At a crowded press conference, the Norwegian Foreign Minister was asked why Norway had called the conference now. He retorted: “Why has it not happened before?” When challenged that Norway belonged to a nuclear alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), he pointed out that all 25 non-nuclear NATO member states were present – implying that only the three nuclear members, the US, UK and France, had boycotted it. In subsequent sessions, scientists and medical experts spelt out the realities and health effects of a nuclear weapon detonation. These were dramatised by the Right Rev Laurence Yutaka Minabe, Anglican Bishop of Yokohama, born of Hiroshima survivors. Speaking softly from the floor, he told how his father recovered from severe burns only to die of radiation-induced blood cancer 30 years later. Then he highlighted the ongoing agony being endured by the survivors of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant disaster, who experienced only a fraction of the radiation and burn effects of even one nuclear detonation.

Dr Ira Helfand, an American physician and adviser to ICAN, focused on recent research findings by climate scientists Alan Robock and Owen Toon. They had applied the latest climate computer models to the impact of a small regional nuclear war between India and Pakistan involving detonation of only 100 Hiroshima-size weapons. They were shocked to discover that, apart from the mutual carnage and destruction across South Asia, enough smoke from firestorms – let alone radioactive fallout – would be generated to cripple global agriculture. Plunging temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere would cause hundreds of millions of people to starve to death, even in countries far from the conflict. For more details, see www.nuclearfamine.org. The nuclear weapon states simply refuse to discuss this.

ChCh Quakes Overwhelmed Emergency Services, Let Alone Nuclear War

The second day focused first on “humanitarian preparedness and response”. Following descriptions of current plans and capabilities, the overwhelming consensus was to agree with the ICRC’s findings: adequate measures were non-existent and impossible – thus prevention and abolition offered the only practicable way forward. The rest of the conference was devoted to responses from government delegations. Even India’s was supportive. New Zealand’s forthright Disarmament Ambassador, Dell Higgie, startled us when she said: “New Zealand’s experience of the Christchurch earthquakes showed that, despite considerable preparation, the 22 February 2011 quake overwhelmed the emergency services; there was confusion, chaos among Police and the Fire Service. A nuclear detonation would be a disaster no country can plan for”.

We were also pleasantly surprised to discover that the UN Development Programme had helped various poorer states, including four South Pacific island states (Cook Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu and Tuvalu) to send delegations. Appropriately, the conference was being held during Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Week. Patrick Akaiti Arioka, from the Cook Islands Deputy Prime Minister’s office, spoke on behalf of all 22 small island states of the Pacific. He pointed out that their region was living with the consequences of 181 French nuclear tests, including a perilously fragile former test site in a cracked coral reef at Mururoa; and he paid tribute to New Zealand for sacrifices it had made to sustain its nuclear-free policy.

NZ Calls For Elimination Of Nuclear Weapons

In the final session, Mexico stole the show when Ambassador Juan José Gómez Camacho announced that his Government was offering to host a follow-up conference to maintain the momentum. Delegates erupted in delighted

applause, many of them in tears. NZ Ambassador Higginson spoke next. Alluding to peevish complaints from the nuclear weapon states, she did not mince her words: “There have been some expressions of bewilderment about why it is necessary to have this conference now, and suggestions – including in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva just this morning – that it might risk undermining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. New Zealand has no intention of undermining the NPT”.

She asked why nuclear disarmament should be promoted only in one forum. “We see no contradiction in promoting nuclear disarmament inside the NPT, and outside it here in Oslo. Indeed, we see our efforts here as very possibly helping us to implement the requirement – as the International Court of Justice told us in 1996 – to conduct, in good faith, negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects. This meeting here in Oslo – in looking beyond the arithmetic of military security to fundamental notions of the survivability of our environment, our economies, and our populations – has served to remind us all that any use of nuclear weapons comes at a cost none of us should be prepared to pay”. To further applause, she welcomed Mexico’s courageous intention to host a follow-up meeting. “New Zealand will wholeheartedly join in all work, in the NPT context as well as in any process following on from this meeting, and from Mexico’s, that brings us closer to our goal: the elimination of nuclear weapons”.

Ireland endorsed her statement, as did Switzerland. The Swiss Ambassador added: “This is an important milestone. Over two-thirds of the UN membership here agrees that it is vitally important to continue this discussion. This conference has shown how powerful the humanitarian aspect is to mobilise support.” Iran added a telling point: “The boycotting of this conference by the P5 questions their intention and good faith; they may regret it”. We agreed, and for an additional reason. Unlike our previous experience of conferences where the nuclear weapon states were present, delegations were not intimidated; furthermore, non-government observers like us were welcomed, even being invited to share the official lunch with government delegations.

In his closing remarks, Norway’s Foreign Minister was euphoric: “Together... we have reframed the discourse. We are taking it out of traditional fora, creating a supplementary initiative. Now we are twice as strong and effective... we have introduced new vigour, and sense of urgency...” As delegates made their farewells and filed out of the hotel, they were serenaded across the street – not by the usual angry demo of frustrated activists, but by a dancing, colourful throng of young, placard-waving Norwegians thanking them, and encouraging them to stay strong in the fresh phase of the struggle ahead. We wiped joyful tears away as we joined them, having dared to dream that we would see this in our lifetimes.

We realised we had just been privileged to witness the tipping point, when enough political will had been generated to face down the nuclear weapon states and throw them onto the defensive. By declining to try to defend the indefensible, the P5 had surrendered control of the endgame agenda. We have no illusions about how much harder this will be than banning landmines and cluster bombs. However, our faith in humanity’s ability to stand up for peace and justice has been rekindled. Now, we need the NZ government to honour the legacy of all those who have helped bring us to this point, and actively support Mexico at the follow-up conference, which we understand will be held by the end of 2013.
