

PM hails World Court decision

'Tide turns' against N-weapons

by Michael Rentoul
in Wellington

10.7.96
Press

A World Court decision partly ruling against the legality of nuclear weapons is a hopeful first step towards the eventual elimination of those weapons, says Prime Minister Jim Bolger.

He joined Opposition parties yesterday in welcoming a ruling by the Hague-based court on Monday against the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons in war. The court was unable to decide whether that included self-defence.

Mr Bolger said the ruling by the 14-judge court was a sign that the tide had turned against nuclear weapons. France's decision to resume underground tests in the Pacific had added to the anti-nuclear cause.

The five nuclear powers last year signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, pledging to reduce nuclear stockpiles. The World Court judgment would hopefully speed up that process, he said.

The United Nations General Assembly and the World Health Organisation had asked the court for a non-binding, advisory opinion on whether international law permits the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons. The court was evenly split on the question of legality, with the matter decided on the casting vote of president Mohammed Bedjaoui of Algeria.

'Powerful message' on disarmament

Mr Bolger said the court found there was no clear signal either way, but went on to "construct a suggestion" that a State could use nuclear weapons to defend itself from destruction. "But its ultimate and most important point was to say 'we must go further than that, and work towards the elimination of nuclear weapons'. That's a powerful message."

By unanimous decision, the court said that "there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control".

Mr Bolger said New Zealand, among other nations, argued strongly that the matter be referred to the World Court. Should nuclear powers not take the hint, and continue cutting stockpiles, the United Nations might ask the court for another ruling pushing the boundaries still further.

Labour leader Helen Clark said she was surprised but delighted at the outcome. She thought the World Court would take a more conservative line, given its recent decision against reopening a New Zealand case against nuclear testing.

"The decision should lead to the world's countries redoubling their efforts to ban nuclear weapons for all time. After chemical and biological weapons, nuclear weapons must now be next on the list for complete international prohibition."

She paid tribute to former Christchurch magistrate Harold Evans, who first promoted the idea of seeking a World Court declaration. Mr Evans was given a standing ovation yesterday as peace groups gathered in Wellington to celebrate the decision.

Hailing the decision as a "great step forwards", Alliance leader Jim Anderton said New Zealand should press for a rapid agreement on a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.