

## **Canada on the wrong side of anti-nuke movement**

By Douglas Roche

Leaders of the Canadian government who in the past few months have contented themselves with vapid excuses for not supporting efforts at the United Nations to prohibit nuclear weapons will have to work overtime to find credible reasons to maintain resistance now that the draft text of a convention has been released.

The heart of the matter is contained in Article 1 (a), in which each state party undertakes never under any circumstances to “develop, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

In other words, nuclear weapons are stigmatized, put beyond the pale and never to be a part of a nation’s armoury. The Canadian government, tied so closely to the nuclear policies of Washington and NATO, will not accept this. And more’s the sorrow. The integrity of the Canadian position that it really wants to do away with nuclear weapons, but not just yet, is in tatters.

For the past three years, a humanitarian movement, led by like-minded states and civil society activists, has gathered support from a majority of nations to develop a legal instrument prohibiting nuclear weapons because of the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of any use of such weapons. A resolution to start such negotiations was adopted at the U.N. last fall with 113 states in favour, 35 opposed and 13 abstentions. Canada voted no and refuses to participate in the process.

The United States instructed all its NATO partners to vote against the resolution on the grounds that the negotiations aimed to “delegitimize the concept of nuclear deterrence upon which many U.S. allies and partners depend.” The U.S. was quite correct in this assessment. Delegitimizing nuclear weapons is exactly what this effort is all about.

The negotiations started in March with 130 states attending the opening round under the chairmanship of Ambassador Elayne Whyte of Costa Rica, who this week issued a draft text, which will be completed at the final round of discussions June 15-July 7.

The document is called a “convention,” which is an agreement between countries on particular matters that is less formal than a treaty. This terminology was used so as not to confuse the exercise with the existing Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which in its nearly half century of existence has failed to produce the elimination of all nuclear weapons. The draft convention holds that the NPT maintains its “crucial importance” as the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime. Rather than competing with the NPT, the new instrument is declared to be “an important contribution towards comprehensive nuclear disarmament.”

The reasons for this new boost to nuclear disarmament efforts are set out clearly: “the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and for the health of future generations.”

The leitmotif of the draft convention is the survival of humanity now threatened not just by the existence of some 15,000 nuclear weapons (about 95 percent in the hands of the U.S. and Russia) but the modernization process now under way in which all nine nuclear weapons states are

increasing their power to inflict devastating damage on adversaries. The draft convention is basically the highest-level appeal to humanity ever made to end the nuclear arms race.

Although it will come into force when 40 states have ratified it, the convention will bind only those states which sign it. The disarmament process will be verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency and disputes resolved by the International Court of Justice. The nuclear weapons states show every sign of ignoring all this. They will challenge the legality of the process and without the participation of the nuclear weapons states, the convention will likely be crippled.

But to take the legalistic view of the convention is to miss its importance as a milestone in the long struggle to rid the world of what has rightfully been called “the ultimate evil.” The new convention will help mobilize world public opinion to develop a universally binding ban. Nuclear disarmament is a moral issue of the highest order. It has to do with human beings seizing the power to annihilate life. Only a few days ago, Ban Ki-moon, the former U.N. Secretary-General, warned that “the world is moving closer to nuclear annihilation.”

In such a dire situation, the call to humanity to save itself is of a higher order than bureaucratic wrangling over legal points. That is the point more than 100 members of the Order of Canada made to Prime Minister Trudeau in appealing to him to reverse Canada’s present negative attitude towards the development of the convention and start putting Canada’s weight behind it.

It’s hard to imagine that Canada – that most trusted of world states – is boycotting a process to develop a legal measure to prohibit nuclear weapons just because the United States insists on maintaining its nuclear arsenals. The issue is not legality but humanity.

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