

Embassy, October 4th, 2006
OPED
By Douglas Roche

Sleepwalking Towards a Nuclear Catastrophe

It takes technical prowess as well as political rhetoric to move the world away from the nuclear precipice, and both skills were on display last week in Ottawa as diplomats and experts from 25 countries wrestled with how to cut down the existing 27,000 nuclear weapons in the world.

A unique consultation, hosted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and run by the Middle Powers Initiative, sought to respond to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's recent warning that the world is "sleepwalking" towards a possible nuclear catastrophe. The Middle Powers Initiative is a NGO-led movement to push key middle power countries to exert their influence with the nuclear weapons states to fulfill their legal obligations to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons.

MPI is particularly concerned that the next review in 2010 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the central instrument that is supposed to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons, not repeat the failure of the 2005 review.

MPI is dedicated to the worldwide reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons, in a series of well-defined stages accompanied by increasing verification and control. The coalition works primarily with "middle power" governments to encourage and educate the nuclear weapons states to take immediate practical steps that reduce nuclear dangers, and commence negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The Ottawa consultation was the third in a series of invitation-only meetings under the Article VI Forum, a program of MPI. The purpose of the Article VI Forum—named after the article of the NPT committing states to nuclear disarmament—is to create an informal setting (the deliberations are off the record) where diplomats, experts and NGOs can discuss ways to strengthen the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime through the NPT.

In addition to 23 "middle power" governments, two of the nuclear states—the United Kingdom and China—sent experienced diplomats to participate in the technical discussions. The United States, Russia and France were invited, but did not attend.

Some 60 representatives from NGOs attended, as well as officials from the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the support organization

for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and members of the International Panel on Fissile Materials, a panel gathering together some of the world's leading nuclear scientists in order to promote the control of the stocks of weapons-grade nuclear materials.

Foreign Minister Peter MacKay delivered a welcoming address, saying: "Canada is committed to a coherent, comprehensive and packaged approach toward the NPT that does not neglect any of the 'three pillars' on which the treaty is based: non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy." He added, "Canada recognizes and supports the valuable role that civil society can play in the NPT review process. Our support for this meeting here in Ottawa today is a tangible sign of that belief." The consultation was held in the Pearson Building.

The UN Under-Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs, Nobuaki Tanaka, delivered the keynote address. "Multilateralism," he said, "is what is required to consolidate these gains in a coherent global framework that is stable, permanent, and just. It is here that the middle powers have enormously important contributions to make. They enter this process from the moral high ground of those states that chose not to seek weapons of mass destruction—they are practicing what they preach."

A central focus for the consultation was five technical issues which are key to any progress in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation: the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Fissile Materials Cut Off Treaty, de-alerting and reduction of U.S./Russian nuclear dangers, negative security assurances, and verification.

Short Term Effectiveness

The CTBT—a treaty that exists but has not yet entered into force—and the FMCT—a proposed treaty for which negotiations have not yet begun—were seen as the two avenues for effective work on disarmament in the short term. The CTBT was signed in 1996, but is not yet in force because 10 of the 44 countries needed for entry into force—including the United States and China—have not ratified the treaty. This treaty is considered key to disarmament and non-proliferation efforts since by halting testing, nuclear weapons states cannot reliably develop new weapons and states aspiring to nuclear status cannot test to ensure their weapons will work. Depending on its scope, an FMCT would halt the production of new fissile materials, require the inventory of all stock and the elimination of excess materials not needed for functioning nuclear weapons.

Verification is a cross-discipline issue dealing with the various ways to ensure that arms control agreements—bilateral and multilateral—are adhered to. The irony is that as the science of verification (satellite inspections; detection systems for air, soil and water; tamper-proof seals) improves, the political commitment to

verification is weakening. This is particularly true of the United States, which has over the last six years rejected any verification mechanisms for either existing or planned treaties, saying that verification is too unreliable. The scientific community and the vast majority of states reject this position.

Negative security assurances—guarantees by nuclear powers not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states—are a long-standing demand of non-nuclear weapons states parties to the NPT. Their argument is simply that since they have renounced the use of nuclear weapons, the five nuclear states party to the NPT should give them unequivocal legally-binding guarantees that they would not be targets of nuclear weapons.

Unlike the other four issues, which require multilateral cooperation, de-alerting is essentially a bilateral issue between the United States and Russia. The strategic postures of the two largest nuclear states still—15 years after the end of the Cold War—have approximately 3,000 nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert aimed at each other. The goal of middle powers is to encourage the two to remove these weapons from alert to avoid accidents.

All this was what is sometimes called "Track Two" diplomacy, i.e., quiet sessions out of the headlines. Whatever its results, it is a lot better than future headlines of nuclear catastrophe.

Former Senator Douglas Roche is Chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative and author of *Beyond Hiroshima*.

editor@embassymag.ca