



Will the Norwegian government join the nuclear abolition race?

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Tim Wright

It would be a mistake to see the recent Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference as the culmination of civil society's recent efforts to set the world on track to nuclear abolition. This was simply our opportunity to demonstrate to governments that we're committed to realizing the "vision" of a nuclear-weapon-free world much sooner than they're prepared to contemplate.

To use a diplomatic term, we should "take note" of the review conference outcome, but not feel limited by it. We should pick out the good bits, and use them to our advantage, but we must energetically pursue our own agenda — the agenda of the overwhelming majority of the world's people — which is nuclear abolition now. Not in centuries to come, as one government representative at the conference suggested.

Six-and-a-half decades have passed since the dawn of the nuclear age. Four decades have passed since the entry into force of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Do the nuclear-weapon states seriously expect us to be satisfied when they say they're doing all they can? We mustn't for a moment accept that a world with 23,000 nuclear weapons is the most we deserve, or the best we can have.

Achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world won't be easy. But the path is fairly obvious to most countries. It's obvious to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. It's obvious to the thousands of people who took part in over 80 actions in 30 nations on Saturday [June 5]. And it's obvious to the 20 million people who signed petitions for the review conference.

Just as governments have negotiated conventions to outlaw biological weapons, chemical weapons, anti-personnel landmines and cluster bombs, they must now begin the process of outlawing nuclear weapons. Why should the most destructive weapons of all be the exception?

What we saw at the review conference — despite the lack of a clear commitment by states in the outcome document to begin negotiations — was a growing tide of support for a nuclear weapons convention from both governments and NGOs.

Norway became the first NATO member to accept the unassailable logic of pursuing such a treaty. It said: "a nuclear-weapon-free world will need an additional legal instrument. This is a topic which is becoming increasingly relevant and important. We are likely to see more discussions on this matter in time to come." Indeed, we have already — right here in Bergen.

The ‘human reality’

There were a number of headlines from the NPT review conference. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s disclosure of the precise size of the American nuclear arsenal: 5113 operational warheads — a truly obscene figure, but no surprise. And the organized walkout by Western governments during the speech of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

But one story that didn’t make headlines — and should have — was the fact that more than 100 survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many of them in their 80s, had travelled to New York with an urgent plea to governments: no one should ever have to suffer as they have suffered.

Their stories — and our collective ability to demonstrate the “human reality” of the nuclear problem — will be crucial if we are to succeed in our effort to abolish nuclear weapons through a nuclear weapons convention. We must engage, for the first time, humanitarian organizations in the disarmament debate, and move beyond the tired, and at times dehumanizing, focus on postures and doctrines.

Divestment schemes

Another important strategy for applying pressure for abolition will be further divestment from nuclear weapon industries. The Norwegian government has shown the way on this, and it’s time for others to follow suit. Most governments and private funds would consider it entirely unethical to invest in chemical weapons, biological weapons or landmines. But nuclear weapons are deemed acceptable. This is absurd.

The decision to divest from corporations involved in the production of nuclear weapons shouldn’t await the negotiation of a convention to outlaw these weapons. Rather, it should be used to stimulate the negotiation of such a convention — by beginning a process of delegitimizing nuclear weapons.

The abolition race

It’s significant that Peace Boat has chosen Norway and Ireland as the start and end points for its on-board discussions about a nuclear weapons convention. Norway was pivotal in the efforts to ban landmines and cluster munitions. Ireland, back in the 1960s, was instrumental in the negotiation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty — and because of its leading role, it was invited to be the first country to sign the treaty.

Will Ireland also be the first to sign the nuclear weapons convention? Or will Norway beat it to it? I personally would love to see these two countries compete for the honour — or my own country, Australia, but I’m far less optimistic about that. This is precisely the kind of rivalry we need to see among nations.

In the nuclear arms race of the last century, there were no winners, only losers. The whole of humanity lost that horrible, senseless race, and are still dealing with the consequences. But now we have an opportunity to begin an altogether different race — one in which we will all be winners. A nuclear abolition race. Let’s get started.

Thank you.