

Buddhist Leader Pushes for Nuclear Abolition Treaty

Nuclear Abolition News | IDN Special

IDN-InDepth News Interview of Daisaku Ikeda

An eminent Buddhist thinker, Daisaku Ikeda, has called for an early start of negotiations for a global treaty to abolish nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, to coincide -- ideally -- with the 70th anniversary of the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. [P] ARABIC TEXT VERSION - PDF | CHINESE Tra | CHINESE Sim | GERMAN | HINDI | ITALIAN | JAPANESE PDF - TEXT VERSION | SPANISH | TURKISH | URDU

An international treaty in the form of a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC) would prohibit the development, testing, production, stockpiling, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons, as well as provide for their elimination. It would be similar in form to existing conventions outlawing other categories of weapons, such as biological weapons, chemical weapons and anti-personnel mines.

Proposals for a Nuclear Weapons Convention are being discussed since 1996. For the first time now NWC has found a reference in the final document emerging from the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) that convened from May 3 to 28 at the UN headquarters in New York.

"We need to build on this momentum," says Ikeda, president of the Buddhist association Soka Gakkai International (SGI), who has for years been campaigning for elimination of atomic arsenal. He formulated a five-point plan early September 2009 aimed at nuclear abolition.

Following is full text of an email interview of the SGI president by Ramesh Jaura for IDN-InDepthNews in partnership with Inter Press Service news agency.

Q: Dr. Ikeda, what do you think of the outcome of the NPT Review Conference? Does it really pave the path for the world to move toward nuclear abolition? Or is it just plenty of promises and platitudes, as some observers maintain?

A: As you mention, people are now trying to assess the outcome of the Review Conference, and there are a wide range of views on this. It was regrettable, for example, that key differences between nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states could not be overcome. As a result, the proposal in the draft report that would have required the start of negotiations on nuclear disarmament within a time-bound framework didn't find its way into the final document. Beyond this, many other issues were left unresolved.

Still, however, the kinds of divisions that paralyzed the 2005 NPT Review Conference were avoided, and the final document includes specific action plans. To me this is clear evidence of the growing awareness among governments that we cannot waste the opportunity to renew progress toward a world free of nuclear weapons.

I am very fond of the words of the Chinese literary giant Lu Xun (1881-1936), who said that hope is like a path in the countryside: originally there was no path – yet, as people continue walking over the same spot, a way appears. I think this very much applies to the process going forward. The key will be for all governments to come together, making the final document the basis for their endeavors, forging ahead, one step at a time, on this untrodden path. At the same time, it is crucial to build international opinion calling for the prompt implementation of all agreements. One key here will be to secure ongoing venues for dialogue between civil society and policymakers.

Q: What would you describe as significant achievements?

A: I think the conference had three particularly noteworthy achievements. First, after affirming that all states need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons, the final document refers, for the first time ever, to proposals for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC).

Second, the conference acknowledged that the only real assurance against the threat posed by nuclear weapons is their abolition. And third, the conference called for countries to observe International Humanitarian Law in light of the catastrophic effects of any use of nuclear weapons.

Calls from non-nuclear-weapon states and NGOs for a Nuclear Weapons Convention that would comprehensively ban these weapons of mass destruction have until now been rejected on grounds that this was premature, or that an NWC was ill-matched to the realities of international relations.

As a result, it was never directly taken up in international negotiations, and this makes the reference to an NWC in the final document of the NPT Review Conference all the more significant.

I believe this was realized by the coming together of a range of actors, starting with the President of the Review Conference, relevant UN agencies such as the Office for Disarmament Affairs, and governments committed to nuclear abolition, and also the passionate, determined efforts of many civil society organizations. The youth members of the Soka Gakkai in Japan, for example, collected more than 2.2 million signatures in support of an NWC, presenting these to the President of the Conference and the UN Secretary-General.

Q: Where do we go from here?

A: We need to build on this momentum. I urge the early start of negotiations on a Nuclear Weapons Convention, with an eye on the next Review Conference in 2015, which will mark the 70th anniversary of the use of atomic weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are many obstacles to be overcome, but I am convinced that the time is ripe for the comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons.

Two principles given voice by statements in the final document make this perfectly clear. The first is: "The Conference reaffirms and recognizes that the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons...."

The second is: "The Conference expresses its deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and reaffirms the need for all States at all times to comply with applicable international law, including international humanitarian law."

Whereas intergovernmental debate on the nuclear issue has often been framed in terms

of political or military logic, this gives clear priority to humanitarian values and the imperative to respect the inherent dignity of life.

Q: In what particular ways are nuclear weapons a humanitarian issue?

A: Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shared their experiences at the Review Conference, urging nuclear abolition. The suffering wrought by the use of nuclear weapons is not limited to the immediate aftermath. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate inhumane weapon, whose impacts continue to cause pain and undermine the foundations of human dignity for generations.

It was for this reason that my mentor Josei Toda (1900-58), the second president of the Soka Gakkai, denounced them as an absolute evil. He was convinced that we could not leave any room for considering them in the same context as conventional weapons, as a necessary evil to be used if conditions require.

Nuclear weapons are entirely impermissible -- both in terms of the grave threat they pose to peace and for their profoundly inhumane nature as an assault on human dignity. This understanding should undergird efforts to establish a Nuclear Weapons Convention. The work of applying the spirit and principles of International Humanitarian Law to nuclear weapons is crucial in bringing down the curtain on the nuclear age.

Q: Dr. Jayantha Dhanapala, president of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, has described the conference agreement on implementing the 1995 resolution on the Middle East as "the most significant achievement" of the conference. But whether this agreement will lead to a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East zone is doubted by experts. Isn't this scepticism justified in view of the U.S. and Israeli reservations on some crucial points?

A: The treaties establishing Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) in Central Asia and Africa that entered into force last year are an important source of hope. These regions join Latin America, the South Pacific and Southeast Asia in establishing NWFZs. This is especially significant because the two new NWFZs include countries that either developed or possessed nuclear weapons in the past.

The next challenge is to promote denuclearization in other regions of the globe. As is the case in Northeast Asia and South Asia, the path toward this goal in the Middle East is strewn with difficult challenges.

This was the background against which the NPT Review Conference called for a conference in 2012 to establish a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction. Needless to say, the issues in the Middle East are complex and not likely to be resolved through the convening of a single conference. In fact, given the history of conflict and violence and the deep-seated animosities in the region, it will be anything but easy even to bring the conference together.

But the current situation is clearly intolerable and could dramatically worsen at any moment. For these reasons, there is a need to develop avenues of dialogue and to find ways to start defusing tensions.

Regarding the perils of the nuclear age, the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) called this a "Gordian knot that has to be untied by patient fingers instead of being cut by the sword." Resolving the long-standing stalemate in the Middle East and dismantling the structures of confrontation will require a persistent effort at dialogue, undoing the tangled threads of fear, suspicion and mistrust. The most basic point to keep in mind, however, is that conflict does not make dialogue impossible, it makes it necessary.

Q: What does that concretely involve?

A: In the search for a world free from nuclear weapons, we need to move away from stances of mutual threat, toward shared efforts to reduce threat and threat perception. Trust needs to be restored and confidence fostered. All actors need to work to create expanding circles of physical and psychological security. I believe this formula applies equally to Northeast and South Asia as to the Middle East. By engaging in future-oriented dialogue, we can bring into view the next step toward peaceful coexistence.

The difficulties facing a Middle East conference underline the need for international society as a whole, including global civil society, to offer its support. The Review Conference final document calls for the conference to be convened "with the full support

and engagement of the nuclear-weapon States." In addition to the support of the nuclear-weapon states, I hope that Japan, as a country with direct experience of nuclear war, will work with other non-nuclear-weapon states to create the conditions for sustained and fruitful dialogue in the Middle East.

Q: What would you advise civil society to do so that promises become a reality and platitudes, binding commitments -- particularly as far as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) and a Nuclear Weapons Convention are concerned?

A: Despite repeated calls, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), adopted in 1996, has yet to enter into force. In the case of the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), negotiations have not yet even begun. I don't, however, consider the situation devoid of hope.

Even given the non-binding status of the CTBT, since it was signed the five recognized nuclear-weapon states have observed a moratorium on further nuclear weapons tests, as have India and Pakistan since 1998. Further, the CTBTO Preparatory Commission has continued to develop the verification regime needed to ensure no country conducts tests.

At the NPT Review Conference, Indonesia expressed its intention to ratify the CTBT. If the United States also ratifies, this will leave only seven states that are required to ratify for the treaty to enter into force. With regard to the FMCT, the five nuclear-weapon states have agreed to suspend the production of fissile materials pending the start of negotiations.

Q: What is required to move these important treaties toward implementation?

A: More than anything, we need to bring together the force of popular will and international public opinion. These alone can create the conditions in which government leaders feel genuinely compelled to make progress.

At this point, however, real passion and interest in civil society is confined mostly to people involved with NGOs directly engaged with the issue. But this is a matter of far too much importance -- the fate of humankind literally hangs in the balance -- to be left

up to a handful of government policymakers.

The movements for treaties banning landmines and cluster munitions were driven by ordinary people, people whose sense of humanity was outraged by the horrific nature of these weapons, whose sense of urgency was propelled by the need to prevent further suffering. In the same way, when people understand how important the CTBT and FMCT are for reducing the threat of nuclear weapons, we will see a powerful groundswell in international public opinion.

From January to March of this year, youth and student members of the SGI in eight countries surveyed their peers regarding attitudes toward nuclear weapons. Many interviewees at first wondered about the reason for this activity, suggesting the degree to which people feel that nuclear weapons are essentially unrelated to their lives. Still, nearly 70 percent of respondents said that the use of nuclear weapons was unacceptable under any circumstance. More than half expressed the view that renewed debate on the nuclear issue could spur progress toward nuclear abolition.

The key, therefore, is persistent efforts within civil society to raise awareness and interest in nuclear issues, including stressing the importance of these treaties. Such efforts can break down the obstacles to progress and transform the most stubborn realities. This is what the SGI has been aiming to do through our People's Decade for Nuclear Abolition, launched in 2007.

Q: What role would you assign to education?

A: At the NPT Review Conference, 42 countries, including Japan, issued a joint statement on the importance of disarmament and nonproliferation education. It is our intention to continue to collaborate with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, treaty organizations such as the CTBTO Preparatory Commission as well as NGOs such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

Together, we can lay the foundations within international society for a world without nuclear weapons. Young people are already taking the lead. When ordinary people join together in solidarity, they have the power to close the gap between reality and ideals. This is our determination as we work for the realization of these treaties and, even more, for a Nuclear Weapons Convention that will comprehensively and effectively ban all

nuclear weapons. (IDN-InDepthNews/21.06.2010)

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