

‘Nuclear-Free Middle East Not Easy’

By Daisaku Ikeda

Ramesh Jaura interviews DAISAKU IKEDA, president of Soka Gakkai International

BERLIN, Jun 20 2010 (IPS) - A meeting called for 2012 on a Middle East free of nuclear weapons is likely to run into difficulties, says Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Buddhist association Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

“The issues involved are complex and not likely to be resolved through the convening of a single conference,” Ikeda tells IPS in an email interview.

“In fact, given the history of war 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.”

The treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones in Central Asia and Africa last year are “an important source of hope,” he says.

Following are excerpts from the interview:

Q: Has the conference (the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons held in May that also called for a conference on the Middle East) paved the path for the world to move towards nuclear abolition? Or is it just promises and platitudes? 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 towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

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 to, for the first time ever, proposals for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC).

Second, the conference acknowledged that the only absolute 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 realised 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 organisations. The youth members of the Soka Gakkai, for example, collected more than 2.2 million signatures in Japan 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 conference reaffirms and recognises 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 inter-governmental 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 ultimately inhumane weapon, whose impacts continue to cause pain, and assault the very foundation of human dignity for generations.

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