

WHY SHOULD WE ABOLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS

By Hiromichi Umebayashi *



TOKYO, Sep (IPS) Why should we abolish nuclear weapons?

This apparently naive question seems to have become a matter of hot debate. In Japan, which suffered nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is a profound desire for nuclear abolition that derives from its first-hand experience of the appalling damage caused by nuclear weapons. Yet this does not seem to be enough to constitute a successful argument for "a world free of nuclear weapons". The effort to bring about a nuclear abolition must be indivisibly and essentially integrated with the challenge of creating a more equitable, just, and humane global society.

When the idea of "a world free of nuclear weapons" resurfaced as practical goal after new anti-nuke initiatives emerged in the United States, I found myself confronting once again the question, Why? The need for a global solution to problems like poverty and climate change is a given, as if tacitly mandated by the standards that guide civilised human society. Nuclear abolition, in contrast, tends to be confined within the category of weapons linked to national security. It is not seen as a moral and global human issue. To succeed, the nuclear abolition movement must be brought into a wider sphere of people's thinking.

Ten years ago I translated into Japanese a book titled, "Fast Track to Zero Nuclear Weapons" by Robert D. Green, a former British Navy Commander. A statement in the book has continued to intrigue me. The author, explaining the analogy between the campaign to abolish slavery two hundred years ago and the nuclear abolition movement, wrote that the campaign to abolish slavery succeeded because "it focused on the illegality of slavery, not just its cruelty."

The lesson of Green's study is that in history the agonies and bitter struggles that human society undergoes can generate the political will to enact important laws, national and international. Even when compromises are necessary to get such laws passed, such legislation will contain legal norms, language, and a conceptual framework

that can be applied in the effort to usher in a new era.

The preambles of international treaties or conventions banning or limiting weapons invoke basic legal norms and principles. However, there is a striking difference between instruments limiting nuclear weapons and those concerning other classes of armaments. The Biological Weapons Convention, Chemical Weapons Convention, Anti-Personnel Mines Convention, and the recent Cluster Munitions Convention all contain a clear exposition of the human and moral basis of the prohibition, which, they argue, is a prerequisite to a civilised world and subject to the laws dictated by human conscience. Surprisingly, this is not the case with nuclear weapons treaties, such as the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

I trust that all readers would naturally assume that the principles underlying bans on biological and chemical weapons would also be prescribed as rightful norms in treaties on nuclear arms, but this is not at all the case. Nowhere in the NPT or CTBT is there a similar invocation of human and moral standards. Can we really achieve a world free of nuclear weapons with such weak legal footing?

We know why this is the case. It is because euphemisms are needed in order to persuade nuclear weapon possessors to join such instruments to bind themselves. As long as we accept this practice, I fear we may fail to establish norms that recognise the real nature of nuclear weapons and their implications for future generations of humanity. We would also be failing to envision a nuclear weapons-free world as a better one for human society.

Our first task, therefore, is to explore how to establish an international legal instrument that can be effective even if countries possessing nuclear weapons do not accept it because it formulates coherent moral norms governing the unparalleled horrors of nuclear weapons. A possible step in this direction would be an international instrument to outlaw the use and the threat of use of nuclear weapons, as discussed in a recent article by Rebecca Johnson (*Disarmament Diplomacy*, Spring 2009). A so-called Ottawa process in which civil society and like-minded nations collaborate would be a feasible approach.

We also need to fully articulate how the world today is distorted by the habit of sabre

rattling and gun diplomacy, the most prominent example of which has been the threat to use nuclear weapons. The norms enshrined in the United Nations Charter to pursue "friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" and "respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without discrimination" will never be attained in a world dominated by the horror of nuclear weapons. The path towards a nuclear weapons-free world should also enable us to envision the new, more humane society embodied in such norms.

- COPYRIGHT IPS

*Hiromichi Umebayashi is founder and special advisor of Peace Depot, Inc. Japan. He holds a PhD in applied physics.