

## TIME FOR A COMPREHENSIVE NUCLEAR WEAPONS CONVENTION

By Dimity Hawkins \*

MELBOURNE, Mar (IPS) - History has never provided a better time to act on nuclear disarmament. The desire to free the world of the 23,300 nuclear weapons currently in global stockpiles has come vividly into the spotlight as both global leaders and civil society groups lead the charge toward abolition.

Last April in a keynote address in Prague, US President Obama declared his intention to "seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons". It is a goal shared by civil society groups worldwide. This April the US and Russia are expected to sign a new bilateral treaty to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which would reduce their nuclear arsenals by 25%. As the US and Russia currently possesses 96 percent of the world's nuclear armaments, all such moves towards freeing the world of these weapons are both welcome and long overdue.



There is growing recognition that verifiable and complete nuclear disarmament cannot be achieved by incremental steps alone but only through a comprehensive framework. To achieve this, civil society groups and an increasing number of governments are joining in a call for a comprehensive Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC).

In 1997, non-government experts from around the world took the bold move of releasing a model NWC. Such a convention had been in discussion for many years in multilateral forums and had gained momentum since the re-launching of the Model NWC in 2007. It is a document that has been accepted twice by the United Nations, in 1997 and 2007.

While governments talk, civil society has again come up with positive solutions, setting in motion an achievable trajectory and providing a blueprint to start work on a verifiable, comprehensive NWC.

It's not a new concept but rather an idea whose time has come.

A NWC would strengthen the handful of disarmament negotiations already in place by prohibiting the production of fissile material and the development, testing, stockpiling, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. Parties would be required to declare all nuclear weapons, material, facilities, and delivery vehicles. They would then be required to abolish their nuclear arsenals in set phases, first taking the weapons off high alert, then withdrawing them from deployment, removing the warheads from their delivery vehicles, disabling the warheads, and placing all fissile material under international control.

While some governments question how much political capital they would gain by pushing nuclear disarmament in highly demanding domestic settings, civil society continues to drive the agenda towards a world free of these ultimate weapons of mass destruction.

Each year about two-thirds of nations vote in favour of a resolution in the UN General Assembly calling for the early commencement of negotiations on a NWC. This is shown in polls commissioned by Global Zero in 2008 in 21 countries indicating that 76 percent of people globally wanted their governments to reach a binding agreement to abolish nuclear weapons within a specified time

frame. The UN Secretary-General has proposed a convention as the first point in his five-point plan for a nuclear-weapon-free world. Civil society and an increasing number of governments see the sense in developing a comprehensive convention or treaty. It is here that we find the leadership required to draw reluctant (especially nuclear-armed) countries towards the plan for zero.

The barriers to the successful negotiation of a NWC are political, not technical. Language of intent from all governments is needed and must be followed with action. Preparations towards a NWC must be made now if the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is to be realised.

Global civil society groups such as the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Mayors for Peace, Abolition 2000, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Soka Gakkai International, and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons are working together on this agenda. These groups, representing medical practitioners, local government, women of peace, people of faith, and people of vision, meet regularly with governments and ambassadors to drive the agenda for a NWC.

On June 5 this year groups all over the world will be taking united actions under the banner "NWC - Now We Can" - demanding global governments move forward the agenda of zero nuclear weapons, driven by concerns that substantial progress may not be made at the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference at the UN in May.

There is growing impatience with the 40 year-old NPT as the threats of proliferation continue. Insufficient substantive progress on nuclear disarmament has been achieved in the past four decades. A NWC would enhance the existing commitments to disarmament contained in Article VI of the NPT by providing a road map to elimination.

Right now there are at least 23,300 reasons to pursue a NWC in the world. And every one of them carries with it an imperative to action. Civil society knows this. Now is the moment for governments to meet the expectations of the majority of the world's people and prepare for a NWC to finally abolish nuclear weapons for all time and for all people. (END/COPYRIGHT IPS)

\*Dimitry Hawkins is the Campaign Director for the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), based in the ICAN head office in Australia (<http://icanw.org/>).