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TAKING A DIFFERENT STARTING POINT

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'If nuclear weapons actually were to be used, what would happen?'

This is the question the Norwegian foreign minister asked the 132 countries, UN organisations and the various members of civil society gathered in Oslo the first week of March to discuss the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons.

Norway's initiative reflects the country's self-appointed role as a humanitarian actor on the global arena. It offers the largest financial assistance to civil society groups worldwide in the field of disarmament. At the same time, Norway is both a NATO member and in a particular significant geopolitical position, being Russia's naval gateway to Western Europe. Norway maintains that NATO is the cornerstone of its security and defence and is in consequence a member of a nuclear defence alliance. As such it faces a challenging 'balancing act' between deterrence and assurance on the one hand, and disarmament on the other. Instigating and funding a ground-breaking conference on the humanitarian impact of

nuclear weapons could be seen as part of its 'soft' approach.

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry has taken an important step towards bringing the world's attention to the devastating impact nuclear weapons could have on humanity in the future, reminding and updating everyone on the horrors associated with their use in the past. It remains to be seen, however, how the Norwegian initiative will navigate challenging political realities and make a lasting impact on the diplomatic processes associated with disarmament and non-proliferation.

A humanitarian framework

Norway's initiative is part of a broader attempt to reframe the nuclear weapons debate. This can be traced back to a frustration with the slowing of nuclear disarmament at the turn of the century, a change of focus towards nuclear proliferation and the possible deterrence of states that could emerge with nuclear weapons, and fear of possible use by non-state actors. With newly-elected President Obama's Prague speech in April 2009, the

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signing of the New START treaty, and the Nuclear Security Summit, the attention of many became focused on arms control.

But when states met in New York for the NPT Review Conference in May 2010, the final consensus document contained reference to the humanitarian impacts arising from the use of nuclear weapons. It was the first time an NPT consensus document linked nuclear weapons-use and possession with international humanitarian law. This opened the door to discussion on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon detonation. In November 2011, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent encouraged all national civil society movements to work towards the ban and elimination of all nuclear weapons by their respective states and emphasised humanitarian aspects.

In May the following year, Norway and 15 other countries presented a document to the first preparatory meeting for the 2012 NPT Review Conference, which welcomed the initiative to highlight humanitarian aspects. Although this document did not add much actual substance to the debate, its contribution lay in demonstrating the resolve of a cross-regional group of states to agree that nuclear weapons are unacceptable on humanitarian grounds alone.¹ The conference this week was an attempt to bring together a much larger group to test out the resolve to work further on this line of approach.

Prior to the official conference, the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) hosted a civil society

¹ 'Dørapneren?', November 30, 2012, <http://www.legermotatomvapen.no/viewstories.asp?id=840>

meeting. Participants were reminded that whatever the targeted strategy of the nuclear weapon states, the effect was to target civilians in an indiscriminate manner, and that outright nuclear war could very well eliminate civilisation as we know it. Speakers referred to a belief in the perceived 'magical' quality of nuclear weapons to deter with minimal risk, despite the evidence of near-misses throughout the Cold War, and evidence of deterrence failure on several occasions.

Lack of awareness

One of the biggest challenges facing both the disarmament movement and governments seeking support for spending on nuclear weapons is the lack of awareness among the general public. With the end of the Cold War, it seems as though the nuclear threat has vanished from peoples' consciousness. Despite the unique nature of the conference and the level of attendance by states, the media coverage even in Norway itself has been sparse.

When interviewed on the Norwegian radio program Dagsnytt 18, American actor and activist Martin Sheen emphasised the importance of dealing with this issue on an international level and to awaken people's concern. He claimed that the starting point in achieving change on the issue should not, or rather could not, be in placing faith in governments, for there is too strong a belief in the current narratives. Instead it would take major shifts in public opinion and action. He suggested that all of the significant political changes that have ever come to fruition have started from the bottom, not the top, and that the concern over global nuclear dangers is no different.

Boycott

None of the NPT Nuclear Weapon States showed up to the Oslo conference (although India and Pakistan did). They judged this to be a distraction from the diplomacy required on other aspects of the 2010 NPT final document, notably the Action Plan. It was a missed opportunity for the five to recruit other member states in the necessary joint activity of disarmament diplomacy. One can only hope that they were busy discussing between them a joint report to the April NPT Preparatory Committee on their progress on the 2010 Action Plan. Writing in the *Guardian*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu asked, 'Should a select few nations be able to 'ensure' the security of all by having the capacity to destroy all?'



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