The Humanity at a Crossroads - Prohibition or Continued Reliance on Nukes?

A talk with Dr. Tilman Ruff, founding chair of the Nobel Peace Laureate ICAN (2017) and co-president of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

Introduction

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for "its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons" (The Norwegian Nobel Committee).

Dr. Tilman Ruff is the founding chair of ICAN, a coalition of non-governmental organizations in one hundred countries promoting adherence to and implementation of the United Nations Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty (NBT), which was adopted in New York on 7 July 2017.

ICAN itself begun in Australia and was formally launched in Austria in April 2007. The campaign founders were inspired by the tremendous success of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which a decade earlier had played an instrumental role in the negotiation of the anti-personnel mine ban convention, or Ottawa treaty. Since ICAN’s founding, it has worked to build a powerful global groundswell of public support for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Strengthening a norm against nuclear weapons

The adoption of the NBT Treaty is a step on a road towards nuclear weapon free world. Dr. Ruff points out, however, that much work is needed to, first, bring the NBT quickly into force and,
thereafter, to consolidate it into robust international law, capable of exercising effective pressure on nuclear weapon states. The NBT will enter into force once 50 nations have both signed and ratified it. Dr. Ruff expresses his concern for the fact that at the time of the interview, the number of signatories was only up to 56. After all, in July, 122 States had voted for the adoption of the Treaty! Dr. Ruff acknowledges that national procedures for signing and especially ratification are bound to take time. Regardless, the civil society needs to play an active role in convincing governments to sign and to ratify the NBT.

Dr. Ruff’s own country, Australia, provides for an example of a country in which the civil society has much work to do, because Australia’s stance is to rely on US nuclear weapons as a guarantor of its security and prosperity. Australia’s conformity with the US stance on the NBT is evident in that Australia made a formal decision not to sign the NBT. Nor has the government deemed it necessary to congratulate ICAN on the Nobel Peace Prize. Australia’s current nuclear policy represents a significant anomaly to Australia’s previous policies as an “international citizen”. Namely, in the past, Australia has committed to all the other significant humanitarian treaties (e.g. the Ottawa Convention on land mines) and has sometimes played a leading role in major humanitarian initiatives.

However, Dr. Ruff is not ready to give up. He says that 73% of the Australians support the NBT and that he hopes that the opposition Labor party will make a specific commitment to sign the NBT, in line with its National Policy Platform. If a policy change can be achieved, skillful diplomacy will be needed to re-negotiate Australia’s agreements with the US regarding the US command and control facilities over its nuclear weapons in the Eastern hemisphere. Dr. Ruff believes that this can be done, while at the same time respecting the NBT obligations, since the NBT does not prohibit military cooperation with nuclear armed states, provided that nuclear weapon activities are excluded. Thailand, New Zealand and the Philippines have already managed to adopted reconciliatory stances on this issue.

Dr. Ruff draws attention to the importance of public awareness in making any change happen from nuclear to de-nuclear. This is true for every country. Specific attention needs to be paid to disarmament education so that the public is genuinely aware not only of the current threat posed by nuclear weapons but also of the role of their own government’s policy in either consolidating the current nuclear architecture or its efforts to abolish it.
Evidence against nuclear weapons

In dismantling the current nuclear architecture, civil society can draw from the ample scientific evidence against nuclear weapons: there simply is no protection from the effects of the use of nuclear weapons. The effects of nuclear war will affect humans and the environment alike. Even smaller nuclear weapon arsenals of France, China, UK, India, Israel and Pakistan pose a global threat, since their eventual use will affect human, animal and plant lives, the climate and the agriculture alike. This reality of nuclear weapons prompts Dr. Ruff to liken present existing defense doctrines relying on nuclear weapons to a doctrine of **self-assured destruction**, and nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to humanity at large.

Regardless of abundant scientific data against nuclear weapons, Dr. Ruff points out that it was only 68 years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (in 1945), that governments agreed to discuss the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Three massive humanitarian conferences were convened to discuss the matter in **Oslo, Norway (2013)**, in **Nayarit, Mexico (2014)** and in **Vienna, Austria (2014)**. The evidence against nuclear weapons was understood by the governments participating in these conferences. However, not all States (especially nuclear weapon states) took part. Dr. Ruff also points out that, to date, no government has commissioned a study on the climate and agricultural impact of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Free World or Nuclear Weapon World?

Nuclear armed states, and especially the United States, have exercised considerable pressure on other states not to sign the NBT. Sweden is a case in point: [the US Defence Secretary Mattis directly threatened Sweden not to sign the NBT](https://www.justsecurity.org/59059/hamburger-dinner-and-deliverance-mattis-on-nuclear-disarmament/), otherwise Sweden’s defence co-operation and eventual NATO membership would be at risk.

Dr. Ruff notices that nuclear armed states are, indeed, worried about the NBT and this, in itself, is a sign that the NBT matters. Nuclear armed states are put on the defensive. At the same token, Dr. Ruff acknowledges that it may take considerable time to change the current nuclear weapon structure.
Dr. Ruff points out that the humanity is currently at a crossroads. One lane is leading to a nuclear free world, and the NBT is one of the tools in achieving that purpose. The other lane is a world in which states continue to possess nuclear weapons.

There is only one problem with the latter scenario: if states are to continue possessing nuclear arsenals, nuclear weapons will be used sooner or later. Dr. Ruff draws attention to serious tensions between NATO and Russia, US and China and in several parts of the world, such as in Ukraine, the Middle East and South East Asia. At the same time, nuclear threats and the intention to use these weapons is openly affirmed not only by the US and Russia, but also by others such as the UK’s PM Theresa May and by India and Pakistan. The continued existence of nuclear weapons is strengthened by the significant underlying arms industry and the enormous governmental investments therein: globally, annual expenditure on nuclear weapons is estimated at US $ 105 billion – or $ 12 million an hour. Dr. Ruff concludes that there is currently no commitment to nuclear disarmament evident among the nuclear armed states and their accomplices.

**Peaceful nuclear energy**

When asked about the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, Dr. Ruff pointed to IPPNW´s stance already from 1998, according to which even peaceful uses of nuclear energy are bound to represent a proliferation risk, in addition to which issues relating to nuclear waste and risks of nuclear accidents (intended or unintended) make nuclear power unsafe and unsustainable.

In fact, the International Panel on Fissile Materials (IPFM) draws attention to both military and civilian stocks (resulting from peaceful uses of nuclear energy) of fissile materials. These materials are the key ingredients in nuclear weapons, and their control is critical to nuclear disarmament. The nuclear-weapon states still have enough fissile materials in their stockpiles for many tens of thousands of nuclear weapons. On the civilian side, enough plutonium has been separated to make a similarly large number of weapons. Highly enriched uranium is used in civilian reactor fuel in more than one hundred locations. The total amount used for this purpose is sufficient to make about one thousand Hiroshima-type bombs, a design well within the potential capabilities of terrorist groups.

In addition to such proliferation risks, there are little justification for investment in nuclear power. Dr. Ruff points out that economical reasons cannot be invoked to justify investment in nuclear
power due to the increasing availability of other sources of solar and wind energy. Moreover, not only is HEU not needed for reactor-based production of radioisotopes used in medicine, but essentially all needed radiopharmaceuticals can be produced more safely in accelerators. More likely, reasons are to be found in imagined effects on prestige, government corruption, state subsidies and possibility to acquire nuclear weapons.

Meeting with President Sauli Niinistö

During Dr. Ruff’s visit to Finland, also President Niinistö agreed to meet him and discuss the Finnish stance on the NBT. The Finnish stance echoes the US stance on the NBT. Accordingly, President Niinistö based his arguments on why Finland is not signing the NBT to, first, that the NBT would undermine the current disarmament structure and, second, to the NBT’s weak verification system. By his own initiative, Niinistö also wanted to emphasize that Finland is not being pressured on the matter. Dr. Ruff diplomatically states that the adversaries to the NBT resort to just any point in the said treaty to justify their argument. He also pointed out that to stand on the side of the status quo means standing on the side of the present nuclear weapons architecture and risks.

Message to Pugwash

Dr. Ruff acknowledges that Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs has been doing significant and valuable work, often behind scenes, in building dialogue on disarmament and non-proliferation and in disarmament education. Dr. Ruff wanted also to express his highest regard for one of Pugwash founders, Prof. Joseph Rotblat, who was the only one of the Manhattan Project scientists who had the integrity to resign from the project, when it became clear by 1944 that Nazi Germany would not be able to produce nuclear weapons. Dr. Ruff wishes all the best and success to Pugwash in its efforts to work towards the nuclear free world.

Katariina Simonen, Helsinki, 15 December 2017