Public Participation in Disarmament

By

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I wish first of all to thank the Organizing Committee of this World Conference for your hard work in preparing for this event. I am honoured to have this opportunity to speak with you and although this is a very sad day we are commemorating, it is also an occasion to be grateful for the solidarity we share in working for one of humanity’s greatest goals.

All of you are here today because you care about the future. You do not want to leave to your children and your children’s children the heavy burdens of having to confront threats from nuclear weapons—from existing arsenals, from their proliferation to additional countries, and from their acquisition and use by non-state actors.

None of us wants to have future generations wondering why we were unable to succeed in eliminating these horrible weapons. Instead, we want the deep satisfaction and pride that can only come from knowing that what we are doing now is in the interest of all humanity.

The joy of liberating the world of tomorrow from the fears we feel today is our reward for all our nuclear disarmament efforts. We have an advantage over proponents of nuclear weapons, because we have a very clear goal in mind, a goal shared by literally billions of people across the globe. The best that advocates of nuclear weapons can offer is the illusion of peace based on a deterrence policy that is intended to terrorize civilian populations with the fear of nuclear retaliation. Compare that to the goal that you and I share. We seek not just to make the use of nuclear weapons unlikely. We seek to make any use of such weapons impossible, because no such weapons would exist anywhere to use.

In this light, how ironic it is that we continue to hear advocates of nuclear disarmament being called “idealists”, when they have by far the most realistic understanding of the way to prevent any future use of nuclear weapons.

We who work in disarmament understand that it is how disarmament is implemented that makes it credible as a means to strengthen international peace and security. We know that countries will give up their nuclear weapons only when they know they will be more secure as a result. There are cases in history when this has in fact already happened.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus all relinquished the many nuclear weapons that had been deployed on their soil. South Africa had once manufactured nuclear weapons but decided to pursue its security interests by other means, including by joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Many other countries once had various projects to develop the capability to make nuclear weapons, but later decided that such weapons would more likely erode their security rather than strengthen it.

Can this also happen among States that now possess such weapons? Of course it can, but it will only occur if enough people demand it and work hard to achieve it.

When the people unite and work together for a common cause, they can achieve what had before seemed impossible. The public outcry from the radioactive contamination from atmospheric nuclear tests in the Pacific after World War II led to the negotiation of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which outlawed such tests in the atmosphere, in the oceans, and in outer space. More recently, successful efforts to negotiate the anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Cluster Munitions Convention both depended greatly upon demands from the public to prohibit such weapons. Public opinion was also united on the repugnance
of chemical and biological weapons, and public advocacy had an important role to play in the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons and Biological Weapons Conventions.

Without question the greatest ally that advocates of nuclear weapons have is the faulty perception by individual citizens that their views do not count, that nobody listens to them, that average people cannot possibly understand the complexities of eliminating nuclear weapons, and that this is a problem that only governments can solve.

Yet if more and more citizens do hold such views, governments in States that possess such weapons will be under less pressure to do something to advance disarmament. It is true that governments do have a central role to play in making decisions to disarm, but it is also true that it is in the self-interest of governments to listen to their people.

Even average citizens who have no knowledge about nuclear weapons have potentially important contributions to make in advancing disarmament. People are not just people—they are voters, taxpayers, and members of political parties and non-governmental organizations that multiply the volume of individual voices. Each person attending this rally today understands the potential of collective action to serve the public interest.

You are participating in disarmament when you sign a petition, write to a public official, publish a commentary, make a film, publish a play, educate yourselves and your friends, teach your children, join or donate to a disarmament organization, or encourage other groups or professional societies to promote disarmament. If governments are ultimately the engines of disarmament, you the people provide the fuel.

So I have several messages for you today. I want to thank you for all you have been doing to advance this cause. I want you to know that your views matter and that you have friends and supporters throughout the world, including at the United Nations. I want to urge each of you to persist with your efforts and to encourage new groups or organizations to take an interest in disarmament—the more diverse the better. You, the citizens of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, can speak with special authority in making the arguments that everybody has a stake in its success and that nobody in society is immune from the effects of such weapons.

It has now been 51 years since the UN General Assembly adopted its Declaration on the prohibition of the use of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons.\(^1\) It declared the use of such weapons would be “contrary to the spirit, letter and aims of the United Nations and, as such, a direct violation of the Charter of the United Nations”. It went on to say that any such use would be “contrary to the rules of international law and to the laws of humanity.” It added that any use would be not just against a single enemy, but “against mankind in general, since the peoples of the world not involved in such a war will be subjected to all the evils generated by the use of such weapons.”

It is always timely to recall the words of this Declaration, because it reminds us of the implications for humanity of any use of such weapons. Given such stakes, I see it as not at all surprising that humanity would rise up to demand nuclear disarmament. People are speaking out, and your words are being heard worldwide. You are becoming part of the solution to one of the most difficult problems of our time, the challenge of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. I am proud to join you in this great common cause.

\(^1\) Resolution 1653 (XVI), 24 November 1961.