Nayarit Conference on the ‘Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons’

As a follow-up of a historic international conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons (Oslo, March 2013), the government of Mexico hosted a 2nd international conference from 13-14 February 2014 in Nuevo Vallarta, a residential resort community in the state of Nayarit, to build momentum for an ambitious diplomatic process that puts the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons the essence of nuclear disarmament efforts and achievement of a nuclear weapons free world, NTI reports.

Delegations representing 146 States from every region of the world, the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and civil society organizations, participated in that conference. Delegations from at least 32 governments in Africa participated in the meeting. Discussions focused on the global and long-term consequences of any nuclear detonation, accidental or deliberate, from the perspective and concerns of the 21st century society, including areas such as public health, humanitarian assistance, the economy, development and environmental issues, climate change, food security, and risk management.

Analysis

Presentations and statements during the Nayarit conference substantiated nuclear weapons are dangerous and destructive, as in Oslo before it. Information and analysis of the catastrophic humanitarian consequence of a nuclear weapon detonation or a nuclear exchange by expert panelists from UN agencies, academics, former military officials, and civil
society organizations emphasized that the continued existence, possession, and deployment of nuclear weapons anyway in the world is an existential threat to the future of humanity and the planet. The evidence presented also underscored the mere existence of nuclear weapons generates serious risk because the bomb may be used by accident and design. Many of the studies presented at the conference brought attention to numerous instances where the incidence of an accidental nuclear detonation has hung on a razor’s edge.

While a dozen delegations expressed skepticism about the possibility of a ban on nuclear weapons, the statements by over 50 countries unequivocally called for the total elimination of nuclear weapons and the achievement of the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. Mexico’s Foreign Minister, Dr. Jose Antonio Meade Kuribrena, led the charge, expressing his government’s position that nuclear weapons must be banned and that the world’s safety cannot rely on weapons of mass destruction. Most of participating African governments supported Mexico’s call to start a diplomatic process conducive to achieve a ban on nuclear weapons.

The conferences in Nayarit and Oslo have cemented the conviction among states that nuclear weapons must be banned once and for all, stated Malawi, and that it is the duty of states to start the negotiations of a legally-binding ban. Along the same lines, Morocco stated that Nayarit presented an important informal intergovernmental forum to launch a political dialogue and concrete action essential to achieve “the noble goal of banning nuclear weapons”. Furthermore, Zambia made a strong appeal for a ban on the use, production, and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, saying that a comprehensive ban had “gained grip” in the international stage over the past couple of years. A ban is the preferred first step towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, it said.

The idea of multilateral nuclear disarmament is as old as the bomb itself. Survivors, people who experienced direct- and
after-effects of a deliberate nuclear detonation or testing, shared their experiences on the scope and duration of nuclear effects. Five Hibakusha, survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, testified on the nightmarish devastation inflicted on those cities and their inhabitants. Their presence and stories were powerful reminders to the international community of the urgency and the overwhelming importance of the need to assure humanity these weapons will never be used again, by design, miscalculation, or accident. Countries such as Algeria, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Marshall Islands, New Zealand, and Ukraine presented shocking statistics on the extent of the impact of nuclear testing on and near territories, causing severe ecological, economic, and public health impacts, and untold suffering to civilians.

The Conference did not produce a negotiated outcome, but a factual summary under the responsibility of the Chair. “Nayarit is a point of no return,” concluded the Chair of the conference. In his summary of the meeting, he called for the development of new international standards on nuclear weapons, including a legally-binding instrument. The time has come, he argued, for a diplomatic process to reach this goal, within a specified time frame. He called for this process to conclude by the 70th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Oslo and Nayarit Conferences provided unique platforms for sharing factual and technical information on the humanitarian consequences of a nuclear detonation among governments, international organizations and civil society. By sharing national experiences and response capabilities, the participants unanimously concluded that no known emergency preparedness and national capacity exist in the world to protect the population in cities from the humanitarian catastrophe of a nuclear explosion.

This is why nuclear weapon-free states from all regions of the world more than ever have expressed interest in a new path to
nuclear disarmament within the framework of humanitarian discourse, writes NTI. Contrarily to pursuing a step-by-step process of nuclear disarmament that requires “good faith” negotiation from nuclear armed states, trying a concomitant comprehensive approach that bans nuclear weapons overcomes the dilemma posed by placing the onus on the nuclear-armed weapons states to lead a process for nuclear disarmament. Invigorated by the confab on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons that allows and demands the participation of all countries in the world, these countries are building a momentum to take action to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. There is a place for both comprehensive and step-by-step approaches that are explicitly tied to disarmament and backed by regular reviews of how the steps are being implemented.

The conference is a relevant process in the elimination of nuclear weapons and achievement of a nuclear-free world. In the view of the Chair, the effort is consistent with government obligations under international law, including those derived from the NPT as well as from Common Article 1 to the Geneva Conventions, it is important to deepen citizens understanding of the effects of nuclear weapons, by approaching the global and long-term consequences of a nuclear detonation, accidental or deliberate, from the perspective and variables of the 21st Century society. In this vein, it is a platform for governments, international organizations and civil society to participate with multi-sectorial delegations, at expert-level, with specialists in areas such as public health, humanitarian assistance, environmental issues, and civilian protection, among others, as well as diplomats and military experts.

The Nayarit conference, and the Oslo conference before it, succeeded in presenting a facts-based approach to espouse broad-based and comprehensive discussions on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons that may commit States and civil society to reach new international standards and norms,
through a legally binding instrument. During the conference itself, most of the 146 governments present demanded concrete political and legal action against nuclear weapons. Those states called specifically for a treaty banning nuclear weapons more than in the first conference. Nuclear weapons are the most dangerous weapons of mass destruction in the world. Their destructive power cannot be circumscribe to a determined time and place, states the Chair’s summary, which builds upon the conclusions reached in Oslo.

More importantly, the conference puts urgency on a comprehensive approach to meet the goal of global nuclear disarmament. For decades, it has rarely been espoused seriously by the great powers. Rather, disarmament has been used mainly as a rhetorical tool to encourage political support for nuclear non-proliferation and peaceful atomic cooperation initiatives by NPT non-nuclear weapons. Recent calls for nuclear disarmament by senior statesmen around the world including those of nuclear-weapon states have put a more serious tone on the subject. The well-publicized conversions of national security leaders to the disarmament cause shows a growing global support for the urgency to negotiate an agreement that eliminates all nuclear weapons, verifiably and irreversibly, from all nations as the only and permanent solution to prevent their use. The conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons is a path towards a comprehensive approach to a nuclear free world and it is gaining momentum.

On the first day of the Nayarit conference, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz announced his government shall host a follow-up meeting later this year about the damage and risks of nuclear weapons. Building upon the conclusions of the ground-breaking meeting in Norway last year and the recent meeting in Mexico, a Third Conference next year on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in Austria will broaden the discussion, deepen the momentum, anchor those conclusions,
and take them forward in the process to outlaw and ban nuclear weapons. Looking forward, many delegations expressed their wish and the Conference reiterated the invitation to nuclear weapon States and States non-parties to the NPT to take part in the Third Conference, in Austria.

In conclusion, the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons detonations has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental and global concern that must be at the core of all deliberations on nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation, as well as a relevant issue in the 21st century global security agenda.

The Nayarit conference was the second to be held on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. In March 2013, Norway hosted the first conference on this subject. On 13 February 2014 morning, on the first day of the Nayarit conference, the government of Austria announced that it would host a third conference to continue the dialogue. Now that an intergovernmental conference has begun on the catastrophic results of nuclear weapons, civil society and academic experts can discuss on panels with government representatives to build momentum and confidence for a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

The International Space Station: a Case for Peace

In January, William Gerstenmaier, associate administrator for NASA’s Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate, announced that the White House intends to extend international space station operations from 2020 to 2024 as part of the 2015 budget request to Congress. He also said that NASA has talked
to its international partners about this. The issue for everyone is coming up with the necessary funds to support the proposed extension. In Europe, many of the participating countries face financial difficulties and may rather be tempted to consider reducing expenditures for space activities. I am, however, confident that the European Space Agency member states will find a consensus and that the international space station will remain there at least until 2024.

Financial difficulties are by no means a new issue for the ISS. I still remember that 20 years ago, in 1994, when I took over the responsibility for the human spaceflight program at ESA, the European space programs were at a crossroads and Europe’s participation in the ISS in particular was under threat of cancellation. Estimates put the costs of the European Columbus laboratory at more than 1 billion euros ($1.2 billion). It should have been brought in several space shuttle flights to the station. This we had to change, so that Columbus as a whole could be transported by a single flight.

With a very committed team and within six months we redesigned the program and based it on the Columbus laboratory and the Automated Transfer Vehicle (ATV) as essential elements. The main contractor presented us with a proposal for a Columbus laboratory that was only half as large but still featured exactly the same experimental capacity as before. It could fit in one shuttle flight to the ISS and should cost about half of the original estimate. We were thus able to submit a proposal to the ESA Ministerial Conference in 1995 in Toulouse, France, that contained, in addition to Columbus, the ATV. This proposal was then accepted by the European ministers in charge of space.

Europe’s other partners in the ISS have not been better off. Every few years there was a budget crisis somewhere. While unity gives strength, it may also lead to hesitations and delays. The ISS once even survived by only one vote an attempt
to cancel it in the U.S. Congress. Some tragic accidents led to additional doubts and threats. But each time the ISS successfully came out of the tunnel.

It is worth pointing out that the ISS not only made it through many programmatic changes, but also adapted itself to some fundamental reorientations in its very raison d’être. The ISS, like all its forerunner space stations, was a child of the Cold War, but it carried the DNA of human spaceflight from much earlier times. Before engineers even drafted the first plans for Skylab and Salyut, visionary authors of the 19th century had already laid down their ideas about human spaceflight. Together with rocket travel to the Moon, a space station in orbit around Earth was one of the two recurrent themes in the early science fiction novels. But only the Cold War brought these dreams to fruition.

Lunar exploration and space station were closely interwoven ideas. One was the consequence of the other and political and technical developments affected them in reciprocal ways. As a result of the famous Sputnik shock of 1957 and the Space Race between the two superpowers that it triggered, lunar landings took the initial lead over circumterrestrial space stations. When the United States won the Moon race with Apollo, the Soviet Union turned its attention to space stations with the Salyut and Mir programs. Then, when the Apollo program was ended, the United States too turned its attention to low Earth orbit with Skylab and the space shuttle program.

Europeans too were galvanized by Sputnik. Everywhere, space activities developed. Europe quickly realized that national space projects alone would not be the right step to take Europe into space and that Europe could only achieve something meaningful if one could bring together all resources in order to work together. However, human landings on the Moon or a permanent human outpost in low Earth orbit exceeded by far the European capabilities. Both superpowers saw their roles in the respective human Moon and low Earth programs as a way to
foster and demonstrate their leadership. Europe could only take, if at all, the role of a junior partner.

So the European countries cooperated among themselves in areas like science and technology, telecommunications, Earth observation, navigation, launch vehicles and human spaceflight, where they could find common interests and build up space programs that were characterized by balanced national leadership, compromise and consensus. At that time, such cooperation was not merely seen as a chance, but also perceived as a burden for Europe; many observers looked with some envy at the United States or the Soviet Union, where things seemed to be that much easier with only one government to decide and one common language spoken among all stakeholders.

Things changed fundamentally in 1990. With the end of the Cold War, the concept of a bipolar world also came to an end. All of a sudden the balance of mutual interests, compromise and consensus became of growing importance in international relations and gradually replaced the former approach of only U.S. and Soviet leadership. The longstanding experience of Europe in cooperative space programs, mainly through the European Space Agency, suddenly turned from a handicap into an asset and a role model.

After the abandonment of Russian plans for a successor to the Mir station, in 1993 Russia became a major partner of the ISS. The participation of Russia was certainly the factor that stabilized the entire ISS program. Without Russia, the United States probably would have given up Freedom, as the Western space station was then known. But true collaboration on the ISS was only possible as far as consensus could be reached between the sovereign partners. The need to clearly define goals and expectations in the cooperative venture so as to avoid misunderstandings was obvious. Without the profound experience of Europe in mutually beneficial cooperation schemes and its influence on the other ISS partners, the
introduction of Russia into the ISS partnership might not have worked so smoothly, if at all.

Nothing demonstrates better the progress that has been made on the long way from political enemies to reliable and mutually dependent peaceful cooperation partners than the astronaut training concept for the ISS. Since 1998, all European astronaut activities are merged in Cologne, Germany, at the European Astronaut Centre. There, however, not only European astronauts but all the other astronauts on the ISS — Americans, Russians, Japanese and Canadians — are trained for their tasks with European laboratory equipment. In the opposite way, European astronauts go to Houston, Star City in Russia, Tsukuba in Japan, or Montreal to learn to operate the systems and components of the partners. This is part of the basic understanding between the international partners that any partner who owns a laboratory or another infrastructure element on the station trains the astronauts of all partners for it.

There is also a somewhat anecdotal example of the progress that has been made thanks to the ISS with regard to Cold War times: The third non-Soviet citizen cosmonaut to fly to a Soviet space station, then Salyut 6 in 1978, was the East German air force officer Sigmund Jaehn. The first non-American astronaut to fly on the U.S. space shuttle, with the ESA Spacelab mission in 1983, was the West German ESA astronaut Ulf Merbold. Coincidentally, at the time of their historical spaceflights, both astronauts had different passports — Jaehn came from the German Democratic Republic, Merbold from the Federal Republic of Germany — but both were born in the same region in the heart of Germany, at places that were only about 30 kilometers apart. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Jaehn and Merbold found themselves working in the same space program, first for the Russian space station Mir and then for the international space station.

Ten years later, in 2001, ESA together with the other
international partners received a letter from the King of Spain informing them that the ISS was awarded one of the most coveted prizes in the world, the Prince of Asturias Award, the highest prize in Spain, awarded yearly to a select number of personalities in different fields. The ISS won the prize in the category of international cooperation.

After 20 years of successful peaceful cooperation among the space agencies of the United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and Canada in this unique undertaking, time has come now to consider the international space station for the highest award in this field on an international level: the Nobel Peace Prize.

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