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NEWSLETTER *April 2011*

Editorial by Peter Whiting

Nuclear Disarmament – time to begin again

Nuclear weapons are again spreading and the risks of nuclear attacks increasing, including in Asia and the Middle East. In part, this alarming scenario is the result of the failure of the older nuclear states to honour their commitments sharply to reduce their thousands of nuclear weapons and to ban them entirely throughout the world.



Professor Tilman Ruff

Speaking at the Social Policy Connections Forum on nuclear disarmament on 29 March, Professor Tilman Ruff, Chair of the Australian Board of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), spoke of slippage in political urgency about nuclear disarmament, and the need to revive efforts to reduce and ban nuclear weapons.

Rev Harry Kerr, Victorian Chair of the ecumenical peace organisation, Pax Christi, spoke of faith communities needing “to rediscover who the God of peace really is, and what it means to live the life of his new creation”. He urged church groups to renew their advocacy to eliminate nuclear weapons.



"Nuclear winter", by 'dimboo', flickr CC

“Nuclear winter” threat

Despite what many may think, the threat of a nuclear war has not gone away. There are more than 20,000 nuclear weapons still, with many on hair-trigger alert. The possibilities of accident, political misjudgment or terrorist attacks are not science fiction, but an ominous current reality.

Many of us attending the talks by Professor Tilman Ruff and Rev Harry Kerr were deeply shaken by the extent of the threat, not just to those millions if directly hit by nuclear blasts, but of the consequences for the whole planet.

Prof. Ruff showed how a “nuclear winter” could be caused by as few as 100 small atomic blasts, of the size used at Hiroshima. The black smoke from these explosions would rise very high into the atmosphere around the entire globe and block out the sunlight, causing temperatures quickly to drop by 20 degrees Celsius, and destroying agriculture and food production. It would take ten years for that planetary shroud to disperse. It is hard to imagine who or what could survive such catastrophic consequences.

It would not take a war between Russia, China or the United States to produce a global winter. An all-out nuclear exchange in the Middle East or between Pakistan and India may well be enough. The urgency of preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons, and of eliminating all of them, is very clear.

If the world needed a wake-up call on the threat from nuclear armaments, surely the ongoing Japanese nuclear emergency places the need for action into sharp perspective. The Japan crisis results from the peaceful application of nuclear technology. The even greater threat from military applications continues to escalate, as SPC’s March newsletter said: “the threat of nuclear war has become more urgent with reports from senior Japanese defence officials that ‘China is rapidly upgrading its nuclear capacity and is trying to reach parity with Russia and the US’ (*The Age*, 28 February, 2011).”

In Australia, the Rudd Government in 2007 demonstrated real conviction about the need for action and took political leadership in the international forum. In September 2009 the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, a parliamentary committee with members from both houses of parliament, recommended unanimously that Australia indicate its support for a nuclear weapons convention. Yet, Government policy has been watered down more recently, with “possible” opportunities for real change now only being “explored”.



Rev Harry Kerr, Chair of Pax Christi Vic.

The prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons is politically possible but it requires political will. How is this political will to be galvanised and brought to bear on the issue? Just what is the appropriate response for groups such as SPC seeking to remove this dire threat to human life?

First, we all need to become better informed about the urgency of non-proliferation and disarmament. Prof. Ruff’s presentation made clear some of the difficulties of expecting human institutions to deal effectively with the inherent threats arising from deployed nuclear warheads. We need to be truly vigilant about these issues and support political steps to address them.

Second, there is real need for consciousness-raising. Relying on the threat of nuclear destruction as a deterrent to war is morally unacceptable; this is a message that needs to be more widely recognised and acclaimed. SPC is involved in this second step, at the educational level, by organising public forums and associated web coverage, as well as in representations to Government (see SPC’s submission in February 2010 to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament). SPC intends to maintain its commitment to agitating about the nuclear issue.

**2 pm, Sunday 16 March 2011,
from the State Library, corner of
Swanston and Latrobe Sts, Melbourne.**

Third, we need to make our expectations known within our community organisations. We Christians can work from deep convictions that another world is possible. Not only must we articulate a faith response to the nuclear threat, but also promote within our churches renewed energy and attention to abolish such an acute threat to human existence. Not just faith communities, but every informed person must resolutely oppose such a threat to the life of the whole biosphere. Courage and leadership are needed. As citizens, individually and in groups, we must press our political representatives about the urgency of effective political action.

Pax Christi Australia is a Christian peace movement with



branches in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland and individual members throughout Australia. Members are involved in

peace efforts in the fields of demilitarisation and security, human rights, ecology, development, economic justice and reconciliation. Contact: Pax Christi, PO Box 31, Carlton South, Victoria 3053, www.paxchristi.org.au/

Prof. Ruff stressed that the campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons is not hopeless. Existing treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) have been achieved through sensible political dialogue. President Obama has declared America’s commitment to seek peace and security without nuclear weapons. Despite fierce opposition to nuclear disarmament from powerful interest groups, the pressure of many committed individuals and organisations such as our collaborators, ICAN and Pax Christi, can and do make a difference.

For many of us, and for our faith communities, it is truly time to “begin again”. The Easter story is one of hope. We should embrace that hope and actively work for peace and justice in our world. Banning all nuclear weapons would surely be a mighty step towards this goal! The wellbeing of future generations may well depend on it.



ICAN was established in by the Medical Association for Prevention of War in Australia and was

adopted by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) globally in 2007. It has expanded to include many organisations and professional groups. Website: www.icanw.org.au/