

Response to President Obama's Prague Speech: Bridging the Vision and the Corridors of Power

Judge C G Weeramantry, 20 April 2009

Former Vice President International Court of Justice

*President International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms**

A world free of nuclear weapons has been the dream of all humanity ever since those dreaded weapons first made their appearance on the global scene. However, there has always been a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between such dreams and aspirations and the thought processes that operate in the corridors of power. There they are dismissed as visionary and idealistic, for the world of realpolitik operates on power and not on ideals.

The speech of President Obama in Prague on April 5th 2009 has built a significant bridge between the world of aspiration and the world of power. Here, from the world's most exalted seat of power, has come a call for an end to this menace which threatens the future of humanity, imperils all civilization and jettisons the values painfully built up over millennia of thought and sacrifice.

The message that leaps forth from the heart of humanity for the abolition of these weapons has never struck an answering chord from the wielders of nuclear power. The conviction with which President Obama emphasizes America's commitment to a world without nuclear weapons sends rays of hope radiating through the entire world community.

For more than sixty years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki the world has been appalled by the unprecedented power of nuclear weapons to produce human suffering on a scale never visualized before. Attila and Genghis Khan pale into insignificance as perpetrators of cruelty when compared to the bomb. Yet this weapon which violates every canon of humane conduct and humanitarian law has continued to be protected by those who have it and to be sought after by those who do not, while the voice of protest passes muted and unheard.

The easier accessibility of the necessary knowledge to put together a crude nuclear weapon grows by the day, and far from humanity being able to remove from its horizons this threat to its very existence, the world permits the danger from this source to keep growing day by day, month by month and year by year. Now more than ever before, there is an imperative need for humanity to jettison this danger to its very survival and the survival of all that it holds dear. As the President so rightly observes, the risk of a nuclear attack has increased. Indeed it has increased to the point where we need urgent action to eliminate it in the next few years rather than the next few decades.

Possessors of the nuclear weapon have propagated the myth that the possession of the nuclear weapon has kept us free from nuclear war for over sixty years, when on the contrary it has brought us near to total destruction time and again. The erection of the Berlin wall 1948, the Suez crisis 1956, and the Cuban missile crisis 1962 are but a few of a series of occasions when good fortune rather than good judgment saved

humanity from catastrophe. As President Obama has so rightly observed, "generations have lived with the knowledge that their world could be erased in a single flash of light".

These are reasons why President Obama's speech needs to be greeted world wide with hope, support and admiration. Affirmative steps are urgently required from the power centres of this world if the desired result is to be achieved. The US call is a great expression of world leadership in one of the most important calls to action we have witnessed in recent times.

When the 20th century dawned there was a universal hope that the mistakes of the previous century of war would be left behind and that a brand new century of peace could be planned. That hope was bungled and humanity made a sorry mess of the 20th century which became the bloodiest century on record.

With the dawn of the 21st century there was likewise a universal yearning for a century of peace. We have however entered it on a note of war and if we do not correct our course, we will have no 22nd century to put our house in order. If the 20th century was our century of lost opportunity the 21st is our century of last opportunity, because no other century has commenced with humanity having the power to destroy itself and all its achievements over the centuries.

It is in the next few years that we need to put our affairs in order on the nuclear front, because as President Obama has observed the risk of nuclear attack has gone up. Indeed the nuclear danger grows from day to day. A number of different causes induce this urgency. Among these are:

- the growth in the number of nuclear powers
- the growth in the number of states seeking nuclear power
- the increase in the power and spread of terrorist groups
- the proliferation of the necessary knowledge to make a nuclear weapon
- the easy availability of materials necessary to put together a nuclear weapons with tens of thousands of tons of uranium being discharged from hundreds of nuclear reactors across the world
- the lack of a comprehensive record even by the International Atomic Energy Agency IAEA, of such material and the trafficking in such material
- the ever present possibility of nuclear accidents with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in storage and many of them in readiness for use
- The launch on warning capability LOWC of several countries, with hair trigger devices set to detect incoming objects and respond to them within minutes, if not seconds
- The increase in the number of mini-wars raging throughout the world which could attract the intervention of more powerful participants
- The increasing disregard for international law in the world community
- The increasing number of flashpoints of international tensions
- The continuing disregard of international law and international obligations by the nuclear powers

- Continued research on and improvement of nuclear weapons
- The difficulty of maintaining nuclear stockpiles, inventorising them, storing them and policing them
- The increasing number of suicide bombers now available for carrying out desperate projects

The International Court of Justice unanimously pronounced in 1996 that there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control. There can be no weightier pronouncement on international law than a unanimous decision of the International Court of Justice. Any nuclear power that disregards this decision is a violator of international law. President Obama's call for action is an important step towards upholding the integrity of international law.

For all these reasons President Obama's statement is a landmark event on the international scene. It gives hope where earlier there was total resignation to the inevitability of a world dominated by nuclear weapons. It shows that the human spirit can rise triumphant against seemingly insuperable obstacles. It shows that we still enjoy the possibility of visionary and humanitarian world leadership.

As President Obama has observed the United States as the only power to have used the nuclear weapon "has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavour alone, but we can lead it, we can start it"

Here is a clarion call to action which cannot but induce hope and happiness in all who have lived so long under the shadow of the mushroom cloud. It sends a thrill of optimism into the hearts of those who have despaired at the insensitivity that prevails in high places on such cardinal issues on which the world has long waited for global leadership.

In short, the Prague speech was an outstanding statement by an outstanding leader on an issue of seminal importance to the human future. The least that can be done is for all people of goodwill across the world to give their whole hearted support to this magnificent new initiative to work towards a world which will live once more without the nuclear weapon hanging like the sword of Damocles over the human habitat, human civilization, human values and humanity itself.

WEERAMANTRY INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEACE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH, 5/1, Roland Tower, Dharmaraja Mawatha, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka