

Address to the National Consultative Committee on Disarmament
Conference: *Eliminating Nuclear Weapons: No Longer The Impossible Dream*
Legislative Council Chamber and Grand Hall Parliament, Wellington

24 May 2009

I am very pleased to be here with you this evening.

These are exciting times to be Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control. It seems that after a decade of stagnation on nuclear disarmament the winds of change are indeed truly stirring.

I will start by outlining the Government's priorities for the portfolio and then I'd like to talk about how I see the international landscape.

Priorities

Just before Christmas the Prime Minister invited me and other Ministers to outline our top priorities for 2009. I listed three. They were:

- progressing the nuclear disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation agenda;
- making a credible contribution to the work of the IAEA Board of Governors especially in combating nuclear proliferation; and
- ratifying the Cluster Munitions Treaty so that we can participate fully in the first meeting of States Parties which will probably be held in the first half of next year.

Let me step back a bit and put them into perspective.

As you of all groups know, New Zealand has traditionally had a profile far above our size or place in the world on disarmament and arms control issues.

This derives to a large extent from our opposition to nuclear weapons dating back to the days of nuclear testing in the Pacific, the case we took to the International Court of Justice on atmospheric nuclear testing thirty-five years ago now and, of course, the nuclear-free legislation.

I know that New Zealand's role on disarmament and arms control enjoys solid support amongst you all, and it serves our international reputation well. It is an important component of our wider foreign policy effort and thus I work closely with Minister McCully.

The international calendar largely drives the direction of our work.

As the May 2010 review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty draws closer, ensuring that New Zealand is well placed to contribute to a meaningful outcome will be a priority for 2009 and into 2010.

Over the same time New Zealand will serve as a nominated member of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog.

The past decade has been an arid time for nuclear disarmament.

The five-yearly review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2005 ended in failure. The thirteen practical steps towards nuclear disarmament agreed in 2000 - and I might add basically drafted by a New Zealand team - were largely ignored by the nuclear weapon states.

The Conference on Disarmament, the United Nations' only negotiating forum on disarmament issues, has been unable even to reach agreement on a programme of work.

At the same time there have been worrying developments relating to nuclear proliferation – such as North Korea's nuclear testing in 2006 and concerns about possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme.

The new international atmosphere

So what has changed now?

Well, there has been a renewed level of optimism in recent months about the prospects for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. It seems that the landscape might be about to change, and greatly for the better.

There have been expressions of support for a world free of nuclear weapons by both the nuclear weapon and the non-nuclear weapon states.

The Prime Minister warmly welcomed in the House the statement by President Obama made in Prague on 6 April in which the President outlined his commitment to moving beyond cold war thinking and to seeking the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.

Russian President Medvedev has also committed to reaching the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

The recent announcement by the United States and Russia that they would start negotiations on a new nuclear weapons reductions agreement is hugely encouraging.

Most recently Foreign Minister Nakasone of Japan announced an eleven benchmark roadmap to a nuclear free world, which contains much that resonates with us.

There are signs that at long last the Conference on Disarmament might be able to get down to work on a fissile material treaty, which has been an objective New Zealand has supported for years.

There are arguments about what exactly it would cover. But at the least it would halt the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons.

The NPT Preparatory meeting

This all played out at the preparatory meeting for the NPT Review Conference which was held in New York from 4-15 May.

I said as that meeting started that I was cautiously optimistic about it. I was too cautious. The meeting exceeded our expectations.

As the final of three preparatory meetings for the Review Conference proper, the main task was to reach agreement on the procedural issues – matters like the agenda – and, in doing so, to set a firm basis for getting down to work as soon as the Conference opens on 3 May next year.

That might sound like a pretty modest objective. I can assure you it is not as simple as it might sound.

The 2005 Review Conference, for example, was bedevilled by disagreement over an agenda. But this year, an agenda was agreed by the end of the first week, together with the President of the Review Conference – Ambassador Cabactulan of the Philippines.

The meeting also importantly provided the opportunity for debates around the so-called three pillars of the Treaty: nuclear disarmament; nuclear non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Our delegation spoke in each of the three debates, as well as making a general statement. We were also associated with a statement and paper on nuclear disarmament tabled by the New Agenda Coalition group of countries – Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden.

I am told that our statements were well received.

The mood of the meeting was for the most part very positive.

The new level of engagement by the United States and the commencement of negotiations between the US and Russia on a nuclear reductions agreement were common themes.

Most delegations welcomed the leadership shown by the largest possessors of nuclear weapons, and stressed that this opportunity needed to be capitalised on.

Achieving agreement on a set of substantive recommendations or elements to go forward to the Review Conference was always going to be difficult. It has never proved possible before.

The Chair tabled a draft document at the beginning of the week which was ambitious and comprehensive. From our perspective it was not perfect. But we could certainly have lived with it.

Unfortunately it turned out to be a bridge too far, and the recommendations were not agreed. This was a pity – but in my view, certainly not a disaster.

I think we can be very well pleased with the outcome of the meeting. A solid foundation has been set for 2010. It was heartening to see that the constructive atmosphere was upheld.

Next steps

So where to now?

I'd have to say that I don't think that a nuclear free world is just around the corner. President Obama stressed it was a goal that that will not be reached quickly. It will take patience and persistence.

I was reading an interview with Gareth Evans the other day in which he spoke about the steps that would need to be taken to get to what he called a 'minimalist vantage point' - getting numbers of warheads down to the low hundreds. The timeframe he set for that was around 2025, perhaps later. Phase two of getting down to absolute zero would start only then.

I understand he spoke along similar lines in New York a week or so ago.

He conceded that some regard this as being a bit too nervously cautious. Perhaps.

I think, though, that the path ahead will be one of practical steps.

For New Zealand, that will mean supporting, to the extent we can, the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Supporting efforts to get negotiations on a fissile material treaty up and running. Continuing to call for increased transparency and confidence building measures in regard to nuclear weapons. And urging further steps to lower the operational status of nuclear weapons.

We need to focus now on the building blocks rather than the stumbling blocks.

These practical steps will help to ensure that the positive climate we find ourselves in today is sustained for the long term - on the path to zero.

New Zealand is in for the long haul. And we will be doing what we can to build support and share ideas to work towards this goal.

I look forward to hearing about the discussions at the Conference tomorrow and your perspectives on the year ahead.

Georgina te Heuheu,
Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control