

27 October 2016: the day when the big reversal in history became possible

Posted by Joan Russow

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ACDN = Action of Citizens for Nuclear Disarmament

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What a fantastic day. It will count as a red letter day in contemporary history " indeed in world history.

Ever since 6 August 1945, the first time an atom bomb was exploded "on a populous city" and by itself, in an instant, caused tens of thousands of deaths, humankind has been living haunted by a possible apocalypse, with the feeling that we might never end to this age of nuclear terror.

But this 27 October 2016 saw three events occur successively in Paris, Brussels and New York, all directed towards an exit from the nuclear age, with the last one opening a door to a change in era.

Paris

In Paris, 101 MPs and senators published an Appeal for a Referendum on the question: « Do you want France to negotiate and ratify with all the States concerned a treaty to ban and completely eliminate nuclear weapons, under mutual and international control that is strict and effective? » This was not a petition or a mere opinion-piece. The appeal that they make to their colleagues and to all French voters is one that these parliamentarians made their own by signing a referendum bill. When this bill gathers the signatures of 185 MPs and senators (1/5 of the Parliament), it will have to be supported by 10% of registered voters (about 4.5 million), and then the French people, gagged for 70 years, will be able to have their say. This is the only available way to make France change her policies, and now it has been opened, by parliamentarians many of whom are closer to the current governmental majority than to the opposition.

Brussels

A few hours later, in Brussels, the European Parliament examined and adopted by 415 votes FOR, 124 AGAINST and 74 abstentions, a resolution on the same subject. It encouraged the UN General Assembly to convene a conference in 2017 tasked with negotiating a "legally binding instrument" " a treaty to outlaw nuclear weapons; it invited the EU member states to support the calling of such a conference and to participate constructively in its process; and it invited the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, to involve herself actively in the negotiation process. That huge majority was possible only through a convergence of leftwing, rightwing and centrist parties, going beyond usual alignments. The parliamentarians are closer to the voters than the governments are.

New York

Finally in New York, around 6pm local time (midnight in Paris), the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, the Disarmament Committee, examined a resolution tabled by 6 countries (Austria, Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa) which had already received support from 57 states altogether. The hall was full as it is on great days. 177 nations were represented. And the vote took place. There too there was a huge majority in favour of opening negotiations on a nuclear ban treaty: 123 FOR, 38 AGAINST, 16 abstentions. And in New York it was much more than a simple wish. It was a decision. It will have to be passed by the General Assembly in a plenary session, but this vote, scheduled for early December, is little more than a formality, since the nations voting will be the same as those that voted this week, possibly augmented by a dozen or more member states absent - states which are all non-nuclear, and few of which are under the US "nuclear umbrella".

The stakes are enormous, because, as a group of Nobel Peace laureates said two weeks back, if the negotiations beginning in 2017 result in a ban treaty, even if the nuclear powers do not take part and refuse to sign it at the outset, this treaty will "create a powerful new norm about nuclear weapons, defining them not as the status symbols of great nations, but as the badges of shame of rogue nations."

The nuclear states reveal their colours

Voting against the First Committee resolution were 4 of the P5 " the nuclear states within the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) which also have permanent seats on the Security Council: USA,

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China, UK, Russia and France " plus one unofficial nuclear state, Israel (outside the NPT). The 33 other votes against were mostly allies of the USA either within NATO, or outside it like South Korea, Australia and Japan. The USA had been twisting arms for weeks to make them vote against. Thus, besides the two nuclear states in the EU (France and the UK still in despite the Brexit vote), most European governments voted against the opinion of the European Parliament, with the notable exception of the Netherlands which abstained despite hosting some US nuclear weapons " the Dutch Parliament last May had imposed a different line on their government.

Note that 3 nuclear nations abstained: China (the 5th of the P5 nations), India and Pakistan. Only one voted for the resolution North Korea! This "rogue state" recently denounced again by the "international community" for proliferation, gave itself the luxury of saying yes to a ban on nuclear weapons, thus pushing its despisers into the camp of the rogue nations and showing up their perfect hypocrisy - without great risk of being disarmed, since they are the self-appointed guardians of the nuclear temple.

Resolution L41

Taking inspiration from the recommendations adopted in Geneva on 19 August 2016, with the support of over 100 countries, by an ad hoc UN Working Group whose terms it echoed, this Resolution:

" decides to convene in 2017 a UN conference tasked with negotiating a "binding judicial instrument" to outlaw nuclear weapons and bring about their complete elimination;

" encourages all UN member states to take part in this conference:

" decide that this conference will meet in New York and will follow the usual General Assembly procedures " unless it decides otherwise " from 27 to 31 March and from 15 June to 7 July, with the participation and contribution of representatives of international organisations and civil society;

" calls on all states participating to make every effort to conclude as quickly as possible a binding judicial instrument to outlaw nuclear weapons and bring about their complete elimination;

" decides that the conference will submit a report on progress to the 72nd session of the General Assembly (in late 2017) which will assess progress and will decide how to follow it up;

" asks the Secretary-General to provide all necessary support for the holding of the conference and to transmit its report to various bodies specified; and

" decides to include in the provisional agenda of the 72nd GA session an item entitled "Advancing negotiations on multilateral nuclear disarmament".

"What a fabulous day !"

The road leading to a world without nuclear weapons is still long and strewn with pitfalls. Over 15 000 bombs are still hanging over our heads. The states that possess them, stigmatised by a ban treaty that they will ultimately have to sign, will have to work out the means of their own disarmament " and do so despite their military-industrial and nuclear lobbies that still hold very strong positions. There will be immense resistance, one suspects.

But for the first time since 1945 the nuclear apocalypse has ceased to be a sure destiny. For the first time, the abolition of nuclear weapons " their banning and their total elimination " has become a serious prospect. That is no longer a sweet starry-eyed dream. It is written into the diplomatic agendas of the UN, of Europe and even of France " provided the referendum takes place and permits the French people to decide on it.

In France and elsewhere it is now the peoples of the world who need to have their say to force the concerned governments (all are concerned, and firstly the nuclear powers) to move forward from promises to action and to bring to effective existence a world without nuclear weapons.

Jean-Marie Matagne, 29 Octobre 2016