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Presentation to the 1st UNGA Committee

The Challenge of Disarmament: Still Nonviolence or Nonexistence

Publication date: Friday 16 October 2015

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Presentation of the Western States Legal Foundation to the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, October 16, 2015, by Andrew Lichterman, Senior Research Advisor, delivered by Jacqueline Cabasso, Executive Director*

As this Committee meets, the nuclear-armed countries are edging ever closer to direct military confrontation in conflict zones around the world, from Ukraine to Syria and the broader Middle East to the Western Pacific. The danger of nuclear war is growing again on a scale measured in months or years. Those who rule in the nuclear-armed states appear comfortable approaching disarmament on a time scale measured in generations and show no interest in taking up the task again anytime soon.

In closing remarks, the chair of last year's First Committee said, "I believe that one of the most urgent messages that rang out loud and clear from the deliberations and draft resolutions of the First Committee ... is the need to revitalize the disarmament machinery, which is in danger of losing both credibility and relevance." Consider the contrast between the Chair's assessment and the view on prospects for disarmament two decades ago. Then, a General Assembly resolution concerning the work of the First Committee could declare that the assembled states were "Encouraged by the changed political climate in the post-cold-war era, which is conducive to further bilateral, regional and multilateral efforts in disarmament..."

No amount of tinkering with the disarmament machinery can turn it into a vehicle for disarmament progress when those in the driver's seat have no intention of moving forward. The new round of conflicts and confrontations, and the resumption of arms racing, are driven by those who have the power to shape policy in the nuclear-armed states. Primary responsibility for the continued scourge of industrialized warfare world-wide lies with the military-industrial complexes and national security state elites at the apex of the global war system, and those in the United States above all. Nuclear-armed states account for three quarters of global arms exports; the United States and Russia together for over half. They provide the kinds of weapons that turn local, low-intensity conflicts into industrial-scale wars that fragment societies, destroy vital infrastructure, and destabilize entire regions. These human catastrophes are used to justify competing armed interventions that raise the stakes even higher, with nuclear-armed militaries operating in close quarters in proxy confrontations that easily could spiral out of control. A small fraction of humanity benefits in the short run from these high stakes competitions; all of us bear the risk.

A civilization in which endless competition is the motor for development is approaching its limits. The quest for advantage within economies has generated immense disparities of wealth, and with it endless conflict. The project of control of the many by the few an inescapable characteristic of a society that generates stark inequality both within and among states has brought with it the endless perfection of state violence. The quest for advantage among states has created weapons that can destroy all states. Heedless extraction of natural resources in the service of endless wealth, and the endless state power that sustains it, threatens to destroy the ecosystems all else depends on.

Progress towards a global society that is more fair, peaceful, and ecologically sustainable is interdependent. We are unlikely to get far on any of these objectives without progress on all. They are not "preconditions" for disarmament, but, together with disarmament, are preconditions for human survival. In our relationships both with each other and the planet, we are now hard up against the choice: nonviolence or nonexistence. Our time is running out.

PS:

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Article 36

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

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Proposition One Campaign

Roots Action.org
United for Peace and Justice

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Womens International League for Peace and Freedom - US section

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New Jersey Peace Action

Nuclear Hotseat Podcast. Los Angeles, California

Nuclear Information and Resource Service, Takoma Park, Maryland

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