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Obama's word breaks ice in Geneva arms talks

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Publication date: Sunday 17 May 2009

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GENEVA

The U.S. president's word - "verifiable" - has set the 65-nation Conference on Disarmament on a possible course toward negotiating a treaty after years of deadlock, most recently because the Bush administration argued that a pact couldn't be verified by inspections and monitoring.

In his speech April 5 in the Czech Republic, Obama detailed a packed agenda of goals in nuclear arms control, including slashing U.S. and Russian doomsday arsenals, adopting the treaty banning all nuclear tests, and negotiating a "new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in state nuclear weapons."

That call in Prague's Castle Square echoed here in the marble-clad halls of the Palais des Nations, where such a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) has been on the to-do list of the paralyzed disarmament conference since the 1990s, as one tool to stop the spread of atomic arms. Today's fear of nuclear terrorism only heightens such concerns.

"The U.S. readiness to negotiate an internationally verifiable FMCT can be considered a turning point," pronounced Foreign Minister Franco Frattini of Italy, whose Geneva diplomats coordinate the talks on a fissile-material treaty.

At the moment, only India and Pakistan - and possibly Israel and North Korea - are producing plutonium or highly enriched uranium for atomic weapons. Four "traditional" nuclear powers recognized under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty - the United States, Russia, Britain and France - have declared moratoriums on production. The fifth, China, indicates unofficially it has stopped, too.

The world has a huge surplus of the exotic, manmade heavy metals known as fissile materials, whose chain-reacting atoms have been the core of nuclear bombs since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

When mere kilograms (pounds) can make a bomb, as much as 2,500 metric tons of the stuff - up to 2,000 tons of highly enriched uranium and 500 tons of plutonium - sit in deployed or disused warheads and in more surprising places worldwide, says the International Panel on Fissile Materials, a non-governmental network of nuclear experts.

Weapons-grade uranium powers Russian icebreakers and U.S. and other missile submarines.**[sic*]** Some 14,000 plutonium weapon cores sit in storage outside Amarillo, Texas. Hundreds of tons of bomb-grade uranium are stashed elsewhere in the U.S. and Russia awaiting "blenddown" to less lethal grades. More stuff sits in university research reactors worldwide. Japan's nuclear power establishment holds almost nine tons of plutonium separated from spent fuel.

Some material is under international oversight, but most is not, and questions are regularly raised about its security in so many far-flung places, especially when international terrorists are known to want to "go nuclear."

The expert panel estimates global fissile material stocks are enough for 160,000 bombs.

"It's a lot of stuff," said Princeton University's Frank von Hippel, panel co-chairman. "Nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation and prevention of nuclear terrorism are easy," he recalled once telling a U.N. meeting. "All we have to do is get rid of 2,000 tons of the stuff."

Concerns extend beyond terrorism. For one thing, future deals to reduce arsenals will look shakier if states have facilities and tons of material at hand to quickly rebuild bombs. For another, a fissile-material treaty is seen as a way to bring India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, nuclear powers outside the Nonproliferation Treaty, into an arms-control regime. And other states, such as Iran, would be more deeply committed not to go nuclear if they join the treaty.

That's why Obama's word resounded so loudly in the springtime quiet of Geneva.

"I was very optimistic after the U.S. delegation said it would be flexible on verification," Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Russian secretary-general of the Conference on Disarmament, told The Associated Press.

The Bush administration, unenthusiastic about arms control in general, had objected that global inspections and monitoring systems for such a treaty would prove too costly and less than foolproof. The Americans also worried that intrusive verification might compromise military nuclear secrets.

Others, including the international expert panel, say verification techniques can be devised to allay such concerns. Much depends on the scope of a treaty - whether it would simply ban new production for weapons, or also whittle away at the overhang of fissile stockpiles.

"These are complicated questions to deal with, but as far as we are concerned they can all be part of the negotiating process," said Italian Ambassador Giovanni Manfredi.

Seeing the "remarkable shift in the U.S. position," as he called it, Manfredi gathered the Americans and other key players in closed-door talks that have now produced a proposed plan for kicking off negotiations.

"Everybody was in practical unanimity," he said. "I didn't hear any objection to having it as a verifiable treaty."

The full Geneva conference is now expected to decide on a negotiating mandate this year. Months and possibly years of arduous bargaining would follow, over issues ranging from how to ensure nuclear naval fuel isn't diverted to weapons, to the question of which countries must ratify a treaty before it enters into force.

The India-Pakistan standoff typifies the complexity of issues. With an arsenal smaller than archrival India's, Pakistan wants a treaty that reduces existing stocks worldwide, thereby shrinking the Indian edge. In New Delhi, however, "India regards the FMCT as a cessation of production of fissile material, but not covering stocks," Shyam Saran, India's special envoy on nuclear matters, told the AP.

A simple cutoff treaty "would be a problem for Pakistan," said Zamir Akram, Pakistani ambassador to the Geneva conference. But "we didn't want to be the ones to hold up the discussion." As long as stockpiles are subject to negotiation, he said, "we are ready."

How ready are the Americans?

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The sudden opening here is sure to set off intense discussions among the Pentagon, the Energy Department's nuclear weapons agency, the State Department and others in Washington. Citing the sensitivity of the evolving situation, U.S. diplomats in Geneva wouldn't discuss treaty prospects on the record.

One disarmament veteran who did, Italy's former Geneva envoy Carlo Trezza, advised taking a long view.

"How ambitious can you be?" he asked in Rome. "I would look for an initial cutoff of production, and later a reduction of existing stocks."

Whatever the outcome, a seemingly endless stalemate has ended. "The possibility is there," observed conference chief Ordzhonikidze. "The will is there."

* Surprising assertion. The reactors on board of vessels normally do not function with Weapons-grade uranium.
(Note of ACDN)