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OEWG

# Reporting from Geneva - Full report, delayed broadcast

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Publication date: Sunday 15 May 2016

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**GENEVA, 9 May 2016**

Dear friends,

I write to you from Geneva, after arriving here this morning. There was a tricky moment at the entrance to the UN building (the man checking passes failed to find me on the authorised list - because of a spelling mistake), but then I was able to attend the end of the morning meeting of the Open Ended Working Group - OEWG - gathered to consider measures for advancing nuclear disarmament. This is week two of the second set of meetings (the first was in February, the third will be in August).

This morning the only speakers were government representatives ; this afternoon their remarks alternate with those of NGOs. It will be the same tomorrow and the following days.

Naturally, everyone says they are in favour of a « world without nuclear weapons ». But should they be banned or not? Everything hinges on the anti-nuclear parties' project for a ban treaty. The NGOs want one, so does a group of governments (e.g. Austria, Mexico, Norway, El Salvador, Colombia, Switzerland apparently..). Other nations do not - e.g. Spain, Canada, Poland, Japan, Italy, Germany... These nations plead for what they call the « step-by-step approach », which looks very much like walking backwards on a moving carpet... In fact, they are the unavowed spokesmen of the absent giants: the 9 nuclear-armed states, none of which deigned to come to Geneva, although this OEWG results from a decision of the UN General Assembly last December. With those states we really get the impression of stirring a soup with a meaningless wooden spoon. For the last fifteen years I have been attending this circus that produces nothing. Yet perhaps, this time, there is a small chance of real movement. There are lots of countries here making serious efforts to push things forward.

I succeeded in getting permission to place my folding display (120cm x 80cm) saying : « IFOP Poll, 3 out of 4 French voters want to abolish the Bomb ». It's at the exit of the big circular room (salle XIX) where the sessions are being held. I'm not sure that I'll find it there tomorrow .... My « Working Paper » has been rejected: not within the guidelines. I should redo one... If I don't, I'll still have one card to play, only one : the 2 or 3 minutes when I can speak on Friday.

I'm tempted to let myself go then... in French or English, I'm not sure which, but I do know what to say. It has to squeeze into 150 seconds, and yet I have more than a thing or two to say.

Good news in passing : Noam Chomsky has enthusiastically signed the Appeal for a Referendum in France, and the signatures of NGO reps are starting to mount up. Not a flood of them yet, but looking a bit like that.

Jean-Marie

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**GENEVA, 10 May 2016**

This morning, loud awakening at 5.40, thanks to Geneva's rubbish-trucks, which parked right under my window making infernal noises - and prolonged ones (hell is like that), presumably in keeping with their hygienic role. Strangely, some of their colleagues parked exactly the same place two hours later to do the same job... or it sounded

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like that. But I must say rubbish is well sorted here : 5 kinds of bins ! And to be honest the first lot cost me only 10 minutes sleep. It was brutal, but healthy after all.

I confess that I'm staying at the Youth Hostel (yes, yes). It's the most economical (or rather, least onerous) in Geneva - the city where barely 1% of inhabitants change lodgings every year (as far as I remember, having studied the question in a previous life).

At 9am, meeting in the UN cafeteria for the English-speaking activists. I sneak in as well as I can. And from 10 till 1, the official circus resumes.

But this time those in favour of a nuclear ban dominate, or at least take centre stage. After Bulgaria, a « step-by-stepper », and the staunchly « humanitarian » Congo, Austria takes the floor. And what a performance! The speaker is Austria's permanent representative in Geneva (seat of the « UN Disarmament Conference », a body in existence since 1979 with 65 members), with the full title of Ambassador. He speaks in the name of Austria, of course, but also for the cosignatories of the « Humanitarian pledge ». And he proceeds to read out in alphabetical order the names of these 127 nations that have signed, 127 of the 193 UN member states. As the litany proceeds, it becomes increasingly demonstrative and jubilant : we are hearing humanity stand tall against nuclear weapons ! Or rather half of humanity, since, to be honest, five of the nuclear states (US, Russia, China, India and Pakistan) must hold nearly half the world's population.

Anyway, at the end of the number, Austria wins a kind of ovation : lively applause from almost all quarters - which is rarely heard in this august hall. (Another blow scored by some NGOs, but I won't name them here). A second nation will get similar treatment : Ireland. Adding to the music came Indonesia, South Africa, Malaysia, Kenya, Mexico, Algeria, Cuba. Mexico observed, virulently, that the assembly is virtually divided in half : the champions of the status quo and the champions of change. That amounts to saying « Your famous step-by-step approach is lie, a porker. And we are not dupes.»

After Japan, very proper and pro-US, I need to leave the room as Iran takes the floor. A pity, really : it might have stirred up memories... But I have an appointment with a no less eminent delegation (don't expect me to say who). What was meant to last ten minutes ended after an hour and a half...

There was still time for a snack before the session at 3pm. Lovely weather and a superb view from the UN. In the afternoon most of the speakers are NGOs. Virtually all tend in the same direction, more or less vigorously. There is little discussion. It closes at 5pm, although it was scheduled to go on till 6.

Now I'm busy on the rewriting of my « Working Paper », in English and French. I said yesterday that I was to speak on Friday, but no, it's tomorrow morning. In other words, given that it's now 1am, in just a few hours. Yet I have to get to bed before the rubbish trucks arrive. Especially because I'll have to practise my thing in English. I'll do that before breakfast.

Good night, little ones !

Jean-Marie

**PS.** Two items of good news: 1. This morning the IFOP poll display was still in place. 2. I received from France a message giving reason to hope that the number of parliamentarians signing the Referendum Bill could approximately double in a matter of days.

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**GENEVA, 11 May 2016**

It's confirmed : Geneva's rubbish services are as punctual as Swiss watches. Only they come a little earlier every day...

That's to tell my coach that three successive nights of only four hours sleep is not ideal for attending a UN event.

I did it all the same. At 12.15 local time. I was the first NGO person to speak, after official statements from Sweden, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Mexico, Japan, Brazil, New Zealand, Jamaica and Ecuador - and before the Philippines, Poland and Algeria. I was calm, a little weary... but really ready. I had to just press one icon of my mobile phone and start talking. Only... one is never immune to the imponderable.

My mobile (brand not disclosed) has a camera function, set beside the mike and supposed to record my speech for posterity. It also has a great autonomy of decision-making. It was fed up with waiting. And deserves sympathy for that. Just when my turn had come, it shut off. I tried casually to make it see reason. But at the same moment I needed to wave my ACDN card to signal my position to the session chair and the cameraman who is filming everything (including our yawns, I guess, since not everything is pulsating). And then I had to press a button to get contact with the loud-speakers, and take off my earphones (to avoid a Larsen effect). And then put the ACDN card back behind the mike and the mobile and over another NGO card - that ACDN card intended to publicize the association to the young world activists who will continue the struggle and who are sadly not numerous enough. In short, too much for one man to do at once in so little time. The inevitable happened. The card fell behind the table out of reach. A good soul picked it up, but I had to let my mobile choose its own life, in this case sleep (result : no recording of my speech), and to connect with the mikes in the room and plunge into my speech. In English. Not straightforward for an old Frenchman with tired neurons.

The gag stops there. Smart listeners surely noticed some hesitations, some stammering and a very French accent. I got to the end of my words - perhaps a bit too quickly. I was dissatisfied, but several Americans assured me it was « very good ». What impact, if any ? I will never know. But I attach the text... it is a private document, since it lacks the status of a « Working paper »... At least I had succeeded in handing it in advance to the official interpreters in the 6 UN languages (English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and Chinese). The French version is available too. But it would be fair to say that the « Right to Survive » will not be enshrined any time soon.

The day had been opened by the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Kim Won-soo, UN Undersecretary, who had come specially from New York to honour us with his presence. We then heard a remarkable exposé by Dr Nick Ritchie, Professor at the University of York (UK). He outlined 4 « approaches » to disarmament negotiations and highlighted two : « first a disarmament process resting on the nuclear states' subjective evaluations of the value they assign to their own weapons in their evolving security context ; and next a process for delegitimising nuclear weapons consisting of undermining their legitimacy independently of the perception of those who possess them (and in fact are possessed by them). » He clearly tended towards the second option, and that won him warm congratulations from several delegations.

The fact is that during the day a clear majority emerged in favour of a ban treaty for which negotiations would have to open in 2017... provided the UN General Assembly so decides in December. The Mexican representative spoke again with his characteristic frankness, putting a series of questions to the countries not agreeing with this, highlighting in particular the contradictions of Japan. On the one hand Japan deplores the divide between supporters of a ban (which it deems responsible for this divide) and the supporters of « step by step » disarmament like Japan. But on the other hand, it calls for and demands consensus. This implies the view, as Mexico remarked, that consensus ought to form around Japan's position.

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Beyond these walls, the wish to ban nuclear weapons continues to gain ground, as was emphasised (in French) by the young spokeswoman of ICAN. She deserves to be quoted :

« At the start of March the majority of Norwegian MPs expressed their support for an international ban of all nuclear weapons ». 77% of Norway's citizens support this. In Australia the Labor Party - which might become the government in two months time - adopted a new political programme last year clearly supporting negotiations for a ban treaty. 84% of Australian citizens agree. The German public are unreservedly in favour : 93% of citizens want nuclear weapons banned ; 85% even want US nuclear weapons withdrawn from Germany. »

Finally, « a fortnight ago the Netherlands parliament adopted a resolution asking the government to support, in the context of the Working Group, 'the start of negotiations for a nuclear ban treaty.' 85% of Dutch citizens agree that nuclear arms must be banned. » (I won't mention the embarrassment of the Dutch representative, who has to change his cloak on orders from his minister, even though the vote in the Dutch parliament won't happen until May 17. He has real difficulty changing his discourse.)

To that you can add the IFOP poll of French citizens which I'm still the only person to talk about, and you will see that the desire to get rid of these cursed weapons is firmly in the hands of us, the citizens.

If I find time later, I'll revisit the events of 11 May, which ended with an official ceremony in the presence of the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs and the UN Messenger for Peace, Michael Douglas.

May 12 is a special day for me : my 72nd birthday. I have set up a little French-English « dinner », to help forget that I am far from my loved ones. We will also commemorate another anniversary : 20 years for ACDN, founded in Saintes on 8 May 1996.

JM

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### **GENEVA, 13 May 2016**

It's the final day of the current session of the Working Group (OEWG). Rain falling in Geneva - don't take that as a sign of fate.

The day began with a provisional verbal report, a synthesis by the OEWG's president, Thani Thongphakdi, who is Thailand's ambassador in Geneva, and whose organising work is valued internationally. The definitive report will be discussed and finalised at the 3rd session of the OEWG, which will be in August. It will contain as faithful as possible a report of all the reflections of the Group, but also some recommendations for the 72th UN General Assembly (UNGA 2016), which is really very important since it could potentially launch negotiations for a nuclear ban treaty, even if the nuclear states were to oppose it and refuse to take part, at least at the start.

For the moment, nobody can fail to notice a cleavage between the champions of a ban treaty, who are a clear majority, and on the other hand the « countries under the nuclear umbrella », who favour a « step-by-step approach » and oppose any comprehensive ban treaty, as do the nuclear-armed states who have boycotted the OEWG. They do no more than repeat one discourse : let's continue to try for progress on the road to disarmament, they say, e.g. to have the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty enter into force (a few more states need to ratify first), or to adopt a treaty banning the production of fissile materials of military grade (a « cut off » treaty), etc.

Only one statement cut through this repetitive discourse : that of Poland, which declared that it favoured a world without nuclear weapons but which, in the interim, pleaded for maintaining the « balance of terror » (without naming it), by evoking both its history full of foreign invasions and the threats newly weighing over it from a nuclear neighbour with great military power (not named either, but you've already guessed...). Certainly, the USA and NATO bear a heavy responsibility for this return to the Cold War. Russia for its part says and feels that it is threatened by the recent inauguration in Romania of the first « anti-missile shield » radar supposedly intended to protect Europe from an Iranian attack.... But the Poles' preoccupations, like the Ukrainians' (not present at the OEWG), cannot be dismissed out of hand. For that reason I went to see the Polish delegation with a view to beginning an exchange - I was unable to set it up in Geneva, but I hope to be able to follow it up from France, since my offer was well received. There was of course no conflict with my dialogues with some delegations on the other side.

The « step-by-step » countries are calling for consensus, which would ipso facto exclude a ban treaty. Consensus is obviously still desirable. But when it is raised up to the status of an obligation, as in the context of the Conference on Disarmament or the NPT, it becomes a recipe for paralysis. If we are not to beat around the bush, it will doubtless be necessary to have a vote. That would be possible in the context of this OEWG, and that would at least make it possible to bring to the UN General Assembly a clear statement of the « relationship of forces ».

There would be one way of unblocking the situation: if at least one of the nuclear states accepted to enter negotiations for a treaty to ban and eliminate nuclear weapons. Why not France? That is precisely the aim of the « referendum by shared initiative » which ACDN is promoting. It has received the support of a number of NGO leaders who have signed our "Appeal for a French referendum" (in its English version).

In addition, this morning I was delighted to learn that my speech had become a "Working Paper", a document now officially part of the debate. It was widely distributed to delegates for this last day of the session and will be posted on the OEWG's site and that of the UN. **So the "Right to Survive" has entered the UN pipeline.**  
<a href="https://www.acdn.net/spip/IMG/pdf/the\_right\_to\_survive.pdf" title="PDF - 213.2 kb" type="application/pdf">

The Right to Survive, the Right for Peoples to Determine their  
Survival and the Referendum as a Means of abolishing Nuclear Weapons

We also heard confirmation that Obama will go to Hiroshima at the end of May, as the first visit by a US president in office. It remains to be seen what he will carry in his briefcase. The entire abolitionist community is mobilising to ensure that his initiative is more than symbolic.

Of Geneva - a town I know a little - I have seen virtually nothing, not even the great water-jet on the Lake. Tourism is postponed till a future date, perhaps.

I have had a crowded week, and am not the only one to feel tired from it. For once, we feel that things are moving forwards. Some delegates are still talking in repetitive clichés, but that's no longer the rule. In this diplomatic forum, thanks to some delegations and thanks to the NGOs, **speech is becoming liberated. We hope that the people will seize this opportunity.**

**You too, don't hesitate to grasp it.**

You can help us to get the referendum that could push France in the process of abolition by filling in, signing and returning the Appeal for a Referendum, which is addressed at everyone and which anyone can sign, disseminate in

their networks, and get signed by friends and acquaintances.

Finally, tell us at ACDN that you are willing to join in the action. Please write to: [contact@acdn.net](mailto:contact@acdn.net)

As Catherine Quéré, MP for Charente Maritime, said to a journalist: **"The French people can open the path to a world without nuclear weapons"**.

JMM

**The End**

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ACT and REACT: [contact@acdn.net](mailto:contact@acdn.net)

[<a href='https://www.acdn.net/spip/IMG/pdf/appeal\\_for\\_a\\_french\\_referendum\\_eng-4.pdf' title='PDF - 324.1 kb' type='application/pdf'>](https://www.acdn.net/spip/IMG/pdf/appeal_for_a_french_referendum_eng-4.pdf "PDF - 324.1 kb")



Appeal for a French Referendum