

## Sabotaging Nuclear Disarmament the Australian Way

by Jon Atkins

In a significant move to emphasise the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and the need to ban these weapons in the interests of global security, a joint statement calling for the elimination of all nuclear weapons was presented to the UN General Assembly Disarmament and International Security (First) Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

This joint statement was created by the initiative of 16 member states and eventually gained the support of 124 countries. Notably these countries included Japan that had previously declined to support a similar statement in April 2013.

This *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons* was delivered to the UN's First Committee by New Zealand's Ambassador Dell Higgie.<sup>1</sup> The statement declared that it is "in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances. The catastrophic effects of a nuclear weapon detonation, whether by accident, miscalculation or design, cannot be adequately addressed. All efforts must be exerted to eliminate the threat of these weapons of mass destruction."

Despite Australia's rhetorical "commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation" and "a world free of nuclear weapons", Australia refused to add its signature to the *Joint Statement*. Instead, in a shameful last minute attempt to undermine the pro-ban statement, Australia produced a much weaker rival statement. This weaker statement was co-sponsored by a handful of nations, most of whom are well known for their hostility to banning nuclear weapons outright. Not surprisingly, the US failed to back either statement.

Australia's rival statement claimed that a ban on nuclear weapons by itself will not guarantee the elimination of these indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction. Rather the realisation of this goal requires "engaging substantively and constructively" with those states that possess nuclear weapons while "recognising both the security and humanitarian dimensions of the nuclear weapons debate."

Based upon documents released under freedom of information laws in February 2014, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) revealed that Australia had led a secret diplomatic exercise to undermine the New Zealand-led initiative to ban nuclear weapons.

According to declassified material, the justification for this diplomatic exercise was the view that "we rely on US nuclear forces to deter nuclear attack on Australia". This justification recycles an assertion contained in a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade submission and endorsed by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in October 2013, namely that a nuclear weapons ban "conflicts with Australia's long-standing position that, as long as a nuclear weapons threat exists, we rely on US nuclear forces to deter nuclear attack on Australia".

It should come as no surprise that Australian diplomats had worked so energetically to undermine the New Zealand-led initiative to ban nuclear weapons. An article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2013 also revealed that Australia had refused to endorse a South African-led statement presented to the UN's non-proliferation treaty meeting in Geneva in April 2013. This South African-led statement, endorsed by 80 member states, was rejected by Australia because it contained reference to an International Red Cross resolution that emphasised "the incalculable human suffering associated with any use of nuclear weapons".

What these lamentable diplomatic episodes clearly show is that Australia has abandoned a principled stand against nuclear weapons in favour of a military alliance with the US and the so-called "extended nuclear deterrence" that this supposedly provides.

Despite Australia's backward stance, the international movement for a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons is gaining momentum. So far there have been two inter-governmental conferences that have focussed on the catastrophic humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. The first was held in

Oslo, Norway, in March 2013 and the second was held in Nayarit, Mexico, in February this year. The Oslo conference attracted 128 states while the Nayarit conference attracted 146 states. In addition the international Red Cross movement, various United Nations agencies and numerous NGOs have participated in these conferences. A third conference is planned to take place in Austria on December 8-9, 2014.

In commenting on the Mexico conference, Tim Wright, Director of ICAN Australia, noted that Australia was one of only a handful of states that explicitly declared its opposition to a nuclear weapons ban at the conference. Despite this, ICAN is continuing to build support for a nuclear weapons ban both within government circles and amongst the public. For example, 100 politicians have so far endorsed ICAN's parliamentary appeal to ban nuclear weapons. Publications such as *Black Mist* which outlines the impact of nuclear testing in Australia and the Pacific region will also contribute to ICAN's national campaign to ban nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>

While Tim Wright accepts that nuclear weapons won't disappear overnight, he is optimistic about "the world coming together to make it clear that nuclear weapons are illegal to use or possess" over the next year or two. Wright is convinced that a legal ban on nuclear weapons will "change the way that these weapons are perceived and greatly speed up the process of eliminating them completely."

### Brief history of events

Date	Event
March 2013	Norway hosts the first-ever inter-governmental conference in Oslo on humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Conference attracts 128 states.
April 2013	South African-led statement opposing the use of nuclear weapons "under any circumstance" delivered to United Nations Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Second Preparatory Committee meeting held from 22 <sup>nd</sup> April to 3 <sup>rd</sup> May 2013 in Geneva. Statement endorsed by 80 member states. Australia declines to endorse statement.
October 2013	New Zealand-led statement delivered to 68th session of the UN General Assembly First Committee highlighting the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Statement endorsed by 124 member states. Australia expresses concern that statement "rubs up against" its reliance on US "extended nuclear deterrence". At the meeting, Australia produces competing statement which attracts the support of just 16 other nations, most of which advocate military doctrines supporting the use of nuclear weapons in certain circumstances.
February 2014	Mexico hosts a follow-up inter-governmental conference to examine the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Conference attracts 146 states. Australia explicitly rejects international movement to negotiate a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons.
6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2014	ICAN to host a large scale Civil Society Forum in Vienna on 6 <sup>th</sup> – 7 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2014, immediately before the Vienna Conference
8 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2014	Austria to host a third inter-governmental conference on humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons on 8 – 9 December 2014 in Vienna.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> New Zealand-led *Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons* delivered to 68th session of the UN General Assembly First Committee, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2013: [http://www.un.org/disarmament/special/meetings/firstcommittee/68/pdfs/TD\\_21-Oct\\_CL-1\\_New\\_Zealand-\(Joint\\_St\)](http://www.un.org/disarmament/special/meetings/firstcommittee/68/pdfs/TD_21-Oct_CL-1_New_Zealand-(Joint_St))

<sup>2</sup> International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) website: <http://www.icanw.org/au/>. ICAN's publication *Black Mist* and ICAN's Campaigners' Kit can be accessed via the website.

24<sup>th</sup> March 2014