



Geneva Reporter

Can recent international attention on the issue of nuclear disarmament lead to any meaningful action?

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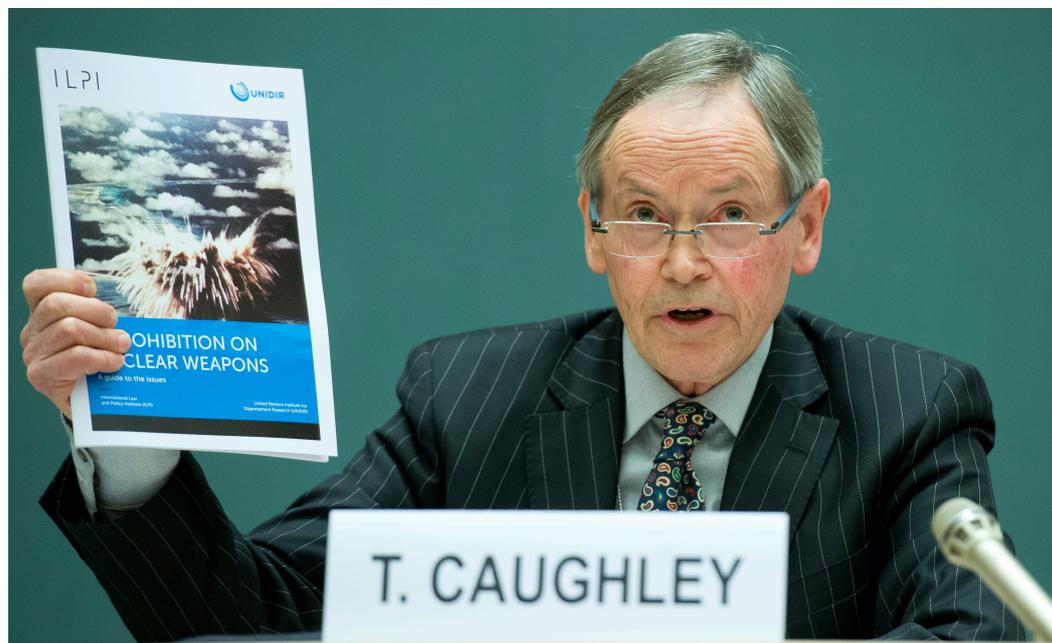
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Former Permanent Representative of New Zealand to the UN Tim Caughley addresses OEWG in February 2016.

Diane Hendrick, QUNO's Peace & Disarmament Representative, shares developments taking place at the international level on the issue of nuclear disarmament.

Why is nuclear disarmament receiving more attention at the international level over the past couple of years?

There have been a number of factors revitalizing the debate around nuclear weapons retention and reminding us that climate change is not the only human-made existential threat we face. The evidence that has emerged of near accidents from faulty technical processes, human error in maintaining nuclear weapons, or even of mistaken perceptions of nuclear alerts, has raised the possibility that it is thanks to luck rather than deterrence that humanity has escaped the catastrophic effects of nuclear weapon detonation. Also an increased focus on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons has led to calls from many non-nuclear states for a ban, with the hope that this would de-legitimise nuclear weapons in a similar way to land mines.

Does this mean there is more movement in nuclear disarmament negotiations?

There is certainly more activity! The traditional forum for multilateral disarmament negotiations, the UN Conference on Disarmament, celebrates the 20th anniversary of deadlock this year but there have been other avenues that have been pursued or opened up to get around this block. There have been a series of three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. However, the Review of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty last year produced only disappointing results. It has been in the UN Open-ended Working Group on taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament (OEWG) that the most open and comprehensive discussion of possible ways forward has taken place.

Nuclear Disarmament *(continued from page 1)*

So, are there actual negotiations on reducing or even eliminating nuclear weapons going on right now?

Not really. The fact that the nuclear-armed states have not been participating in these discussions at the OEWG (although their views are reflected by those states that have nuclear weapons stationed on their soil or who are under the “nuclear umbrella”) means that an exchange of viewpoints and suggestions of ways forward—some competing, some complementary—have been discussed but no negotiations, or even agreed roadmap for negotiations, have yet emerged. Present international tensions are being used as the explanation for the reluctance to engage in serious negotiations at this time.

So it's business as usual then?

It might not be if the frustration of a large number of non-nuclear states reaches the point where they decide to press ahead with negotiations for a nuclear weapons ban treaty. A proposal to convene a negotiating conference in 2017 for a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons has received substantial support. However, as no nuclear weapons states will be part of this, it will not in itself be a disarmament measure. It remains to be seen what effect this might have on the willingness of nuclear states to engage in serious negotiations, or even the kind of steps in confidence building or reduction of nuclear fissile material that could constitute the first real steps towards disarmament.

Climate science in simple, personal and ethical terms

In addition to our quiet diplomacy work at the international climate change negotiations, QUNO organizes meetings with scientists from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). QUNO's Lindsey Fielder Cook explains.

Over the last two years, QUNO has created spaces for groups to meet with scientists from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and together explore the ethical implications of climate science. We also work with IPCC scientists to help communicate climate science in more simple, personal and ethical language.

We view this work as critical, since current rates of greenhouse gas emissions due to human activities are placing the climate system on track for a likely 4C global mean surface temperature rise above pre-industrial levels by 2100. This unprecedented rate of global temperature rise would be catastrophic to most species, including our own. At QUNO, we see this as a “call to conscience”; these catastrophic levels do not have to happen if there is urgent action, yet many people either don't realize the urgency, or if they do, feel disempowered and afraid.

For the Paris Climate Conference last December, we prepared for negotiations a two-sided summary of the extensive IPCC 5th Assessment Report. We did this, aware that even well-informed negotiators struggled to communicate the most relevant points to their decision makers. This work led to an invitation from the IPCC to attend an Experts' Meeting on Climate Communication, held in Oslo from 9-10 February.

For this Experts' Meeting, QUNO submitted a paper calling for a “Summary for Citizens,” in which scientific findings are communicated simply but clearly, engaging openly with the

level of urgency facing humanity, the root causes, and what individual action, when multiplied, can make a significant difference. We also encouraged greater focus on sustainable human behaviour (including consumption), and how multiplied action could lead to decreased emissions. We are concerned that in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, discussions usually focus on “technical fixes” to continue current levels of, or aspirations to, unlimited economic growth, rather than on questions of sustainable economic growth and lifestyles on a planet with limited natural resources.

The IPCC meeting enabled us to better understand the IPCC mandate, and pressures which scientists and authors face in preparing the next Assessment Report. While the IPCC recognizes the difficulty in communicating often complex information to a range of policy makers, the overall discussions did not support the creation of an IPCC “Summary for Citizens.” They could support efforts of an outside organization creating this as a “derivative” product, but their mandate remained focused on policy makers.

QUNO is seeking funding to help create a simple, brief, science based publication. We recognize that current climate change findings are frightening, and easily met with fear. QUNO sees ways to engage citizens with a more ethical and personal narrative that can empower urgent action to help ensure that the most vulnerable communities now, and all our future generations, will not suffer profoundly due to our actions today.

Forgotten victims: children of parents sentenced to death or executed

Laurel Townhead and Daniel Cullen attended the World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Oslo in June 2016 to raise awareness of this often overlooked issue.

Why is this issue important?

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research into the wider impacts of the death penalty, looking at how others beyond just the accused individual, such as criminal defence lawyers and death row prison guards, are harmed by its use. QUNO's work in this area focuses on the rights of one of the most vulnerable affected groups: children whose parents are sentenced to death or executed. This forms a part of a broader area of work we are undertaking on the rights of the children of incarcerated parents. A death sentence for a parent has profound impacts on their children, yet their experiences are often overlooked in criminal justice processes. These children have been referred to as the 'forgotten' or 'hidden' victims of the death penalty.

What are some of the issues experienced by these children?

Issues often faced by children whose parents are incarcerated include negative health impacts. For example, these children face a greater likelihood of experiencing mental health problems, with the witnessing of a parent's arrest being especially linked with later trauma symptoms. Other common issues relate to the impact of a parent's absence, which can reduce children's standard of living due to loss of family income, and affect access to healthcare and education. Maintaining a relationship between parent and child, where this is appropriate, has been found to mitigate some of these harmful effects.

For children whose parents are sentenced to death, these issues can be exacerbated or prolonged, with incarceration on death row meaning the looming threat of future execution. Stigma against those sentenced to death may limit the child's ability to grieve for their parent's absence, while physical contact may be forbidden during death row visiting. When execution does take place, this means the permanent denial of that parental relationship, and has been found to have a traumatic impact on children. In some circumstances, executions may be shrouded in secrecy, with little information provided. Families may not be informed until after the execution occurs, and in some cases may not even have the body returned to them for burial.

Where do these problems occur?

This issue is most relevant in those countries that continue



A poster at the 6th World Congress Against the Death Penalty in Oslo.

to impose the death penalty. Fortunately, these countries are now fewer than ever, with only 29% of states now actively using the death penalty. In the last fifty years, the number of states that have abolished the death penalty has grown from a minority to the large majority worldwide.

Some of those states that no longer use the death penalty still retain the punishment in law, however. In this context, death sentences may continue to be handed down, and parents may still be incarcerated on death row. The possibility of a return to the use of the death penalty means that for children in these settings, the risk of their parent's execution is still present. Even where the death penalty is abolished both in law and in practice, children may still be affected if their parent faces the death penalty overseas.

How does QUNO work on the issue?

QUNO works on this issue from a human rights perspective, focusing on the impacts on these children with reference to their rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other international human rights instruments. The most relevant guiding principle established in the CRC is that the best interests of the child must be taken into account as a primary consideration in all decisions affecting them – this applies to decisions relating to their parents, including at the points of prosecution and sentencing.

Forgotten victims *(continued from page 3)*

What has been done in the UN system?

There has been some positive recognition of the issue by international bodies since we began work on this issue. Resolutions passed at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council have directly acknowledged the rights of children of parents sentenced to death or executed. During UN Committee on the Rights of the Child sessions, the Committee has addressed questions and made recommendations on the issue to countries being reviewed. In the context of children of those facing incarceration, the Committee has made recommendations on the incorporation of assessments of the best interests of the child at various stages throughout their parents' involvement in the criminal justice system.

Specific recommendations on the rights of children of parents sentenced to death or executed have been made by the Committee:

- The existence of children and their best interests should be taken into consideration, and psychological and other necessary support provided to children whose parents have been sentenced to death
- Death sentences should not be carried out on mothers who have a child they are caring for
- All children whose mothers have been executed must be released into a safe care environment
- The child's right to information regarding the status and location of their parent should be upheld

The following additional recommendations are confirmed in Human Rights Council resolutions:

- Children whose parents or parental caregivers are on death row should receive adequate information about a pending execution to enable a last visit or communication with the convicted person
- After execution, states should ensure the return the body to the family for burial, or inform the family where the body is located

These issues were discussed by the Human Rights Council in a Panel in September 2013.

What more can be done in the future?

We hope that the overall trend towards the universal abolition of the death penalty will continue, so that children are no longer subject to the rights violations associated with this form of state-perpetrated violence.

The summary report of the Human Rights Council Panel discussion recommended the development of further guidance on how to ensure the rights of affected children. It also highlighted the need for further exploration of some of the understudied aspects of this issue. We believe this should include the experiences of children of foreign nationals sentenced to death and the ongoing impacts of parental execution into adulthood.

Visit quno.org/Children-of-Prisoners for more information.

Highlights from QUNO New York

Our Prevention programme has been meeting with UN actors, member states, and non-governmental organizations to better understand their perspectives and priorities, and potential avenues for collaboration. QUNO is working with the African Union (AU) and African Member States to help strengthen relationships between the UN and the AU. This project is being carried out in response to a specific recommendation from a recent UN review – the Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations.

The Peacebuilding program has been following the recent resolution on the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture as well as the High Level Thematic Debate on Peace and Security. UN Representative Camilla Campisi spoke at a side event to the debate, and stressed how enhanced cooperation with civil society and regional organisations can help the UN fulfil its purpose. Additionally, QUNO hosted a Burundian

Quaker pastor at Quaker House for a few days in April, where he spoke to the UN community and Member States.

As a continuation of the ongoing work with partners in China, QUNO collaborated with the American Friends Service Committee to bring a group of Chinese UN experts to New York, where they presented their views on China's increasing engagement in UN peace operations. Staff are also working on a project to support Member States in the follow-up reviews for the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in regards to the peaceful, just and inclusive societies component of the Goals. In March, QUNO held our annual "What's Next in Peacebuilding?" event at Quaker House, where peacebuilding organizations from around the world came together to discuss a variety of issues relevant to peacebuilding practice today.