

Getting Serious about Zero

BY TILMAN RUFF

There is much that Australia can do to help create a world free of nuclear weapons, especially in light of fresh assessments of their catastrophic potential damage.

Last year the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved the Doomsday Clock forward to 5 minutes to midnight, stating: "Not since the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has the world faced such perilous choices."

Recently, state-of-the-art atmospheric models have been applied by atmospheric scientists Brian Toon of the University of Colorado and Alan Robock of Rutgers University to evaluate the consequences of a regional nuclear war involving just 0.03% of the explosive power in the world's arsenals – within the capacity of eight states including Israel, India and Pakistan.

Apart from immediately incinerating devastation and radioactive fallout killing tens of millions, global climatic consequences would be unexpectedly severe and persist for 10 years. Cooling, with killing frosts and shortened growing seasons, rainfall decline, monsoon failure and substantial increase in UV radiation, would combine to slash global food production. One billion people could starve. Preventing any use of nuclear weapons is clearly of paramount security concern for every inhabitant on the planet.

The Australian Labor Party came to office with a commitment to abolishing nuclear weapons through a nuclear weapons convention. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's announcement of an International Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Commission to report to an international summit in Australia next year is a welcome initiative. If well-supported and resourced, and focused on building coalitions and momentum in the lead-up to the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

Review Conference, it could help break the logjam and bad faith that have eroded the NPT disarmament and non-proliferation bargain to the point of rupture.

There is a lot more that the Australian government can do to walk the talk towards a nuclear weapons-free world. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister should both stay strongly engaged on nuclear issues. The capacity of their departments on non-proliferation and disarmament needs to be ramped up.

Australia should also explore ways to denuclearise its military alliances and not provide facilities or personnel for any possible use of nuclear weapons. This would greatly strengthen Australia's credibility in nuclear disarmament by concretely reducing the role of nuclear weapons in our "own shop". It would apply the most effective possible political pressure on the US and other nuclear armed states, and reduce the incentive for nuclear weapons to be targeted at Australia.

Australia should withdraw from participation in missile defence, which is destabilising, technically unfeasible and fuels vertical proliferation. Uranium mining should be phased out.

In the meantime, Australia should work to reduce sharply the proliferation dangers inherent in the nuclear fuel chain by supporting urgent efforts for multilateral control of uranium enrichment capacity globally, and exploring all possible avenues to stop reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel to extract plutonium. This means not participating in the US Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, which envisages extensive spent fuel reprocessing.



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Credit: Eric Li, United Nations Association of Australia

Any R&D on uranium enrichment still being undertaken at Australia's nuclear facility at Lucas Heights should be shut down.

Australia should advocate cessation of civilian and military use of weapons-usable highly enriched uranium, including the production of isotopes for medicine. Finally, to show positive leadership through significant action addressing the energy crisis, Australia should promote renewable energy and the creation of an International Renewable Energy Agency.

The growing recognition that nuclear weapons must be abolished and the imminent election of a new US President provide perhaps the best opportunity in a generation for serious progress on nuclear disarmament.

The government deserves encouragement and support to grasp a real opportunity for leadership and integrity by removing the most urgent threat to global health, and moving decisively away from being part of the nuclear problem.

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