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An Abolitionist's Logbook

New York, the capital of nuclear disarmament?

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For the next week we are publishing the daily notes that ACDN's president is sending from New York. From May 3 until May 28 the 8th Quinquennial Revision for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is taking place at the UN Headquarters. It is possible that the survival of the human race is at stake there.

New York, 1 May 2010.

Here it is 6am, in Paris noon. Everyone's idea of midday is a local one, and I will not be surprised on my return to learn that Paris and its "microcosm" (as a former PM once said) are not pulsating with the same preoccupations as New York and its "big thingummy" (as General de Gaulle once called the UN). It is true that the French - by which I mean those who lead France and French "opinion" - have never so far paid much attention to what the UN says and does. On the subject of nuclear disarmament it's even worse. It's not even that we lose attention, we are deliberately "distracted" from giving attention. "Move on, Messieurs Dames, there's nothing to see." Recently on state television we witnessed beautiful examples of this disinformation by silence. Let's hope that this time, perhaps thanks to traces of Obamania, things will go a bit differently.

Here in New York the serious stuff has not yet started.

And yet, actually, it has: it started yesterday on Friday at 6pm (midnight Paris time). The official conference begins on Monday, but is preceded by another conference, organised by and for NGOs. This is the "International Conference for a Nuclear-free, Peaceful, Just and Sustainable World".

A thousand participants (paying 30 dollars each) crowded the great hall of the "Riverside Church" (NW Manhattan), made available by the United Methodist Church, for the first of the four planned "Plenary Sessions". The three others are today, with workshop sessions in between.

First of all we heard an African-American woman, Vinie Burrows, give a magnificent reading of the speech made by Martin Luther King in this very church on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. It's a powerful text in which MLK denounced the three scourges of his time: racial discrimination, social injustice, and war. In other words, it hasn't dated a bit..

Then six speakers followed. Terumi Tanaka, representing the "hibakusha" (survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and himself a hibakusha, brought their testimony in Japanese - with good English translation - and launched an appeal for the abolition of nuclear weapons. This had happened in 2005 for the previous NPT conference, which ended in a fiasco.

Next Ibrahim Ramey, an African-American who is a Muslim religious leader, evoked "Martin Luther King's dream and ours" with a peace message of great vigour.

Zia Mian, a peace activist and university researcher then invited us to "tackle the challenge of nuclear weapons, capitalism and climate change". In his view, to struggle to abolish nuclear weapons is fine but it's not enough. The nuclear arms budget that the Obama administration proposes for 2011 will reach 50 billion dollars. It's huge but it still amounts to only 10% of US weapons budget. Abolishing nukes will not stop the other weapons from existing and doing great harm.

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In fact the very structure of the capitalist world, where a small elite decides everything for everyone, monopolises wealth and power, and massacres nature at the same time as human beings, that is what must be contested, that is what we must manage to overturn. But the task is huge, and things are not progressing quickly, to say the least. Zia Mian had started his speech by reading parts of the speech that President Kennedy gave in 1961 to the UN General Assembly. In words of astonishing lucidity, JFK was already calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons... (Note that that was before the Cuba Missiles Crisis happened in October 1962 and convinced him even more that the two superpowers absolutely needed to commit to a disarmament process). But JFK went further and ended his speech with a call to rid the world of all weapons. So Barack Obama is not only far from being the first US president to talk disarmament, his objective is a relatively modest one... and looks even smaller when you examine the actions and financial choices his administration is making.

After a musical interlude in French from the feminist pacifist singer Catherine Lecocq, the three final speakers continued on the same lines, mixing reasons for hope and reasons for anxiety if not despair.

John Burroughs, the main organiser and MC used his opportunity to expound "the risks and the chances" that this NPT conference offers for the elimination of nuclear weapons. We have no illusions, but we are acting as if there is hope.

After him the Russian Natalia Mironova, spoke in imperfect, forceful and precise English about the "the complex challenges" we face from the "the nuclear heritage" - a heritage which for her goes far beyond the nuclear weapons themselves. Well, my friends, it's not too sad. I'll return to this topic.

Lastly Tomas Magnusson, president of IPB (the International Peace Bureau) emphasised how much words get distorted, in a world of military-industrial lobbies. It's a world where, for example, the Nobel Prize for Peace - awarded a hundred years ago to the IPB, in 1910 - is given now to the leader of a power waging several wars, or the Director of a UN agency, the AIEA, which contributes to defending the nuclear status quo. Thomas Magnusson, a peace activist since 1968 (who was imprisoned as a conscientious objector) nevertheless concluded by expressing his heartfelt wishes for "a world free from nuclear weapons"

Let us express our wishes, then. Here is one that has some hope of coming true, according the forecast: wonderful fine weather over New York... I hope it lasts! Tomorrow we march in the streets of Manhattan. Guess why!

TO BE CONTINUED