

Beneath the deadly nuclear clouds

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IN MARCH 1970, IT SEEMED THE world was resolved not to let history repeat itself when the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) was endorsed under the auspices of the United Nations.

The Treaty said to be the most multilateral treaty after the United Nations Charter, was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to further the goal of general and complete disarmament. For example Article VI in the Treaty states: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

For this purpose, NPT is given a life span of 25 years by which time the negotiations for nuclear disarmament was expected to be completed.

This optimism was further compounded by the end of the Cold War. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri), in the last year of the Cold War, there were 36 major armed conflicts. Since then, the number has gradually tapered. In 1993, it was down to 33 and in 1994, two less.

In addition, in December 1993, Washington and Moscow slashed their nuclear arsenal by about two-thirds as agreed under the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START), a result of negotiations between the two superpowers since 1982. Even related war slangs such as "killed ratio", "flexible response" and "mutually assured destruction or MAD" were being scrapped.

"New" nations such as Kazakhstan was persuaded to rid itself of all nuclear weapons. On the surface, it looks like things are turning for the better.

But, this is not to be. There are still nations that are bent on taking the world to the brink of a nuclear disaster. China for example, conducted its nuclear test, on May 15 this year, less than 48 hours after a NPT review conference held in New York. On June 13, France decided to resume a series of eight underground nuclear testings in the South Pacific at Mururoa Atoll (French Polynesia) after a long moratorium. The tests, one of which, according the French prime minister, is on a "new nuclear warhead", are expected to continue well into 1996.

This is in inspite of the promise to "exercise utmost restraint" on nuclear test made by France during the NPT conference in May.

Now, the Americans are reported to have strongly bid for continuing underground test as well. In fact, as late as October last year, the US President reaffirmed the policy of first-strike option, and the right to retaliate with nuclear weapons even in response to a non-nuclear attack. The Americans have shown that they are capable of this in the last World War, and there is no reason to doubt as to what they can do in the future.

Since 1970, the estimated number of nuclear weapons has increased from around 36,000 to about 50,000 in 1993. Their level of sophistication has also grown. In other words, the NPT has not been effective and its status needs to be drastically reviewed. Unfortunately, it appears that the threat of deadly nuclear clouds is still going yo hang over our heads.

On May 11, it was announced that the NPT would be extended indefinitely. The powers that be have won the day. They've got what they wanted, namely, the right to cling to their nuclear arsenal.

Now, it maybe no more than a passing interest to record that barely a year ago, the First Committee of the UN General Assembly on November 18, adopted overwhelmingly another resolution calling for nuclear disarmament. In mid-December, just three weeks later, the resolution was adopted by the planery meeting of the UN General Assembly with an even greater majority of 163 in favour with none against.

The resolution urges countries with nuclear capicity to continue their efforts for nuclear disarmament with the ultimate objective of the total elimination of nuclear weapons. It also calls upon all states to fully implement their commitments in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Eight countries, namely Brazil, Cuba, France, India, Israel, North Korea, UK and US, abstained from supporting the resolution.

It is clear that the nuclear-weapons states have no intention of forsaking their nuclear might as indicated by recent events. While they argue that other countries should renounce nuclear weapons in order to preserve peace, the nuclear-weapons states claim that they still need a number of warheads for precisely the same reason.

Thus the arrogance and hypocrisy continues.

It is now left to the International Court of Justice (World Court) based at The Hague to give an advisory opinion concerning the legality of the use of such weapons.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) made this request, asking the World Court to rule on two questions, namely whether, taking into account the effect of nuclear weapons on health and the environment, their use by a state during war or other armed conflict would be a violation of that country's obligations under international law. The second question asks whether the recourse to the threat of use of nuclear weapons is allowed under international law in any circumstance.

The Court will meet in open session from October 30, It is expected to issue a decision some time next year. 30 countries will make oral submissions to the Court.

Nevertheless, while the world anxiously awaits the decision of the World Court, it may not be the end of it all. This is because countries, particularly nuclear weapons states such as Britain, China, France, Russia and the US, can decline to recognise the jurisdiction of the Court. This has happened before. In 1973, New Zealand and Australia applied to the World Court in a similar move against France, but France withdrew its recognition of the World Court and chose to continue to endanger the world by conducting nuclear tests.

If this happens again, we will be saddled with a potentially explosive problem. With the present trend, radioactivity will no doubt be heading the list of toxicological hazards in world, and in pretty quick time.

Already, the levels of background radiation in the environment has been reported have to increased. After three decades of atmospheric and the underground tests, the South Pacific is now left with "pollution, sickness and handicapped children".

Imagine then if a nuclear war erupts. The damage would be catastrophic. Take into account the probable after-effects of such a disaster: the fallout, famine, disease, mutation, nuclear winter and so on. It may well be the final reckoning for planet Earth and all its inhabitants.

To quote Leo Szilard, a theoretical physicist who was instrumental in the development of the atomic bomb, in a petition to President Harry Truman: "Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly-liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale."

As such, the fight to save this planet from such a disaster is to make it nuclear-free. It is really puzzling why weapons of mass destruction such as chemical and biological ones are banned and not nuclear weapons. Nuclear weaponry is a crucial issue that needs total commitment to enforce all control treaties while working to have it banned forever.

Given the current trend however, it looks like it is going to be a long drawn out battle. But it must be pursued relentlessly for the sake of the generations to come. Going by the events during the Cold War, not only has the types of deadly bombs increased during that period, but more than 2,000 nuclear tests were conducted, almost three-quarter of which was done underground (the rest atmospheric).

More significantly, about 50,000 nuclear warheads were also produced. These were supported by the development of other sophisticated nuclear weapons delivery systems: aircraft, aircraft-carriers, submarines, rockets, guided missiles, and so on.

And as vividly demonstrated in the Gulf War in 1990-1991, the science of war has now reached a very sophisticated level. What is only needs is to be fitted with nuclear warheads.

The world should tremble with fear if that were happen.

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