

Citizens' Weapons Inspections in the Absence of the United Nations

Mr President, honoured delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

You see before you a strange combination of a Belgian Senator and a citizens weapons inspector of secret nuclear weapon bases. In Belgium many know me from the TV screen as a most agile politician, scaling high fences - and sometimes falling down. So, why should a politician belonging to the conservative liberal party let himself be manhandled by the police and spend hours in handcuffs in cold police stations, if I already have the democratic authority to question our ministers in Parliament? Because in Parliament I can be sure of never getting a simple answer to a simple question: are there nuclear weapons in my country? Most frustrating, ... Which is why I have considered it necessary to participate with other responsible citizens in "Citizens' Weapons Inspections". This movement anticipated, as it were, the 2000 NPT Review Conference, where all signatories to the treaty agreed to 13 steps towards the abolition of nuclear weapons. Among these steps were calls for greater transparency by the nuclear weapon states, who are also required to report on their compliance with Article VI; yet none of the weapon states has so far delivered any adequate or meaningful report on their current stocks of nuclear weapons, facilities and fissile materials

These disarmament and transparency obligations must be treated as just as binding as the commitments made by Iraq, North Korea and Libya. It is extremely hypocritical that certain nuclear powers that call for UN weapons inspections in Iraq, North Korea and Libya should themselves be unwilling to disclose information about their own stocks, even to elected members of parliament. We are particularly concerned about the complete lack of transparency and democratic control regarding US nuclear weapons in Europe. Though the NATO states concerned argue that the nuclear sharing agreements under which these weapons are deployed do not breach the letter of Articles I and Article II of the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which outlaw the transfer of nuclear weapons from a nuclear weapon state to a non-nuclear weapon state, we are very concerned that these NATO deployments are in violation of the spirit and intentions of the Treaty, as understood by the vast majority of its states parties. If we want all states to abide by the norms and obligations of the NPT in spirit as well as in letter, then we must do so too. The concept of "Citizens Weapons Inspection" was developed in this context, reflecting the conflict between nuclear secrecy and democratic responsibility and accountability.

Let us look back over the history of these weapon inspections.

The idea of the "citizens' inspection" arose in 1997, while international attention was focused on the UNSCOM inspections in Iraq. On July 8th 1997, the first anniversary of the historic advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice regarding the illegality of nuclear weapons, an international delegation of peace activists served notarized Citizens' Summons to all NATO heads of state during a NATO Summit in the Spanish capital Madrid. The summons demanded that the NATO governments fulfil their existing disarmament obligations under the NPT.

As there was no satisfactory response to the Citizens' Summons, the main entrance to the NATO headquarters in Brussels was blocked by activists on August 6th 1997

for a 'war crimes inspection'. This was the start of a continuing series of citizens' inspections in Belgium and elsewhere, with concerned people asking not only for transparency, but also for governments to comply with international and humanitarian law.

Because of the lack of openness about nuclear weapons kept by the US and its allies, and the absence of UN inspectors in these countries, many citizens felt the necessity to start their own inspections of nuclear related sites. At many sites around the world they searched for the presence, production or deployment of nuclear weapons and the plans to use nuclear weapons. To our knowledge, citizens' inspections have been organized in Australia, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and the US.

A "Citizens' Weapons Inspection" involves groups of concerned citizens, members of parliament, community leaders and other prominent figures. These inspections can assume various forms, and our goal is to have citizens inspecting all countries which are suspected of harbouring nuclear weapons and in which there are no active UN inspections.

These inspections have all been conducted nonviolently, openly and accountably. Nevertheless, in almost all cases, the official response to inspection has been repression: in the form of arrest, detention and prosecution. In the most spectacular cases, involving many hundreds of inspectors, the police have deployed huge amounts of equipment and personnel in an attempt to thwart the inspection. I myself have been arrested at least five times, and once prosecuted, for breaking various domestic laws, such as trespassing and criminal damage. I defended my action as a justified attempt to uphold international law.

Europe is a densely populated region. Any use of nuclear weapons within this region would inevitably cause massive civilian casualties. It is difficult to conceive of any use of these weapons outside of the region that would not also cause indiscriminate civilian casualties or that could be justified as necessary for the "very survival" of the NATO countries involved. In either case, nuclear weapons use would be a violation of the findings of the International Court of Justice, in its advisory opinion of July 1996. And as the Judges pointed out, if the use is illegal, so is the threat of use, and these deployments implicitly threaten use.

It is alarming that a state can react in this way to prevent a legitimate action designed to uphold international law. It highlights once again the lengths to which the authorities will go to conceal information and prevent democratic debate about these weapons.

The results of these weapons inspections are summarized in a detailed report coordinated by the Belgian NGO *For Mother Earth*. This Citizens' Weapons Inspection report is available on the list of NGO materials and was posted on the World Wide Web today, making it accessible to all interested parties. Now we want to express our gratitude to the many members of the Citizens' Weapons Inspection Working Group of Abolition 2000 and the other peace groups without whose efforts this report would not have been possible today.

Mr President, honoured delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

What is the purpose of these inspections and report?

There is a clear need for more transparency and accountability. People are entitled to know if nuclear weapons are being developed or deployed in non-nuclear states. They are also entitled to know what is happening in the nuclear states. Where are these weapons of mass destruction located? Is there an intention to use them? Who are the targets?

Citizens' Weapons Inspections are designed to dispel the secrecy surrounding the weapons of mass destruction maintained by official and de facto nuclear weapon possessors, and to urge those states to comply with international law and dismantle their stocks of nuclear weapons.

Pending the coming of this greater transparency, these actions (which are most of the time well covered by the media) keep the broader social debate alive. Not only the thousands of activists and the more general peace movement, but also broad sections of the population are thus made aware of the problems of peace and security. When sufficient numbers of people shaping public opinion see a problem in this situation, politicians will be forced to take positive action towards greater transparency and more disarmament.

Mohamed El Baradei, head of the IAEA, stated on February 12th in The New York Times: *"We must abandon the unworkable notion that it is morally reprehensible for some countries to pursue weapons of mass destruction yet morally acceptable for others to rely on them for security, and indeed to continue to refine their capacities and postulate plans for their use"*.

That is why members of parliament and citizens have joined together to take part in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in order to obtain information about weapons of mass destruction where no UN inspection teams are dispatched. We do this to force an open discussion on the issue, in parliament and in the courts. We do this to urge the UN to organize inspections in all nuclear states. We do this to prevent their use and, ultimately, to push for their complete abolition.

Thank you for allowing us to share this information with you today.

Patrik Vankrunkelsven, Senator
For Mother Earth

Note:

The Citizens' Weapons Inspection report is available on
www.motherearth.org/nuke/reportNPT2004.pdf