

Group seeks nuclear weapons ban

By Gordon Corera

BBC security correspondent, Paris Dec 2008



Many dignitaries support 'Global Zero'

A group of international dignitaries have launched a new campaign in Paris to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Global Zero consists of 100 leading figures seeking practical steps towards nuclear abolition and gaining public support for that goal.

They say the risk of nuclear weapons spreading to unstable countries or getting into the hands of extremist groups is too great.

The group will hold meetings in Moscow and Washington in the coming days.

In the past, talk of nuclear disarmament was confined to the margins of political debate, but now a chorus of national security officials past and present have joined calls for multi-lateral disarmament.

In the US, the debate was kick-started by a joint call for "getting to zero" from a group of veterans of the Cold War, including Henry Kissinger and George Schultz.

Global Zero's aim is to translate this stance to the international arena and into public debate.

Signatories for Global Zero include former US President Jimmy Carter, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso, businessman Sir Richard Branson, Ehsan Ul-Haq, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Pakistan, and Brajesh Mishra, former Indian National Security Advisor.

Hopes and fears

Motivating those who attended was a sense that this is a moment pregnant with both possibilities and dangers.

Possibilities because of new leadership in the US which appears to support the goal of nuclear abolition but dangers because of the fear that if this moment passes without action then the nuclear race could quickly gather pace with many more countries acquiring weapons and the risk increasing that weapons could fall into the hands of terrorists.

“ We have to work on de-legitimising the status of nuclear weapons ”

Queen Noor of Jordan

"It's not about idealism, it is about public safety and security," said former British Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind who attended the conference.

"If there's to be disarmament, it has to be multilateral," he added.

A key aim is to build public support for the issue in the way that activists have helped put climate change on the agenda.

Polling of 21 countries for Global Zero found an average of 76% of the population favouring an agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons within a timetabled agreement.

But members of Global Zero emphasise the need for more public information, particularly to educate the post-Cold War generation for whom the dangers of nuclear weapons may be more remote.

"We have to work on de-legitimising the status of nuclear weapons," Queen Noor of Jordan told the BBC.

'Getting to Zero'

The conference began on Monday with a presentation on what would happen to Paris in the event of a nuclear detonation before moving towards a discussion of what "Getting to Zero" would mean in practical steps, for instance the need for an intrusive system of inspections to ensure no country was evading its obligations.



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former British Defence Secretary

"That process needs to start with American and Russian leadership," argued Richard Burt who was Washington's Chief Negotiator in the START talks in the early 1990s between the two countries and who chaired the press conference in one of Paris's ornate hotels.

The Global Zero group believes that reducing the still large US and Russian stockpiles - which make up 96% of all the nuclear weapons in the world - should be amongst the first steps which in turn can then draw in third parties and other nuclear powers into a wider and deeper process.

Senator Mikhail Margelov, Chairman of the Russian Senate's Foreign Relations Committee spoke of how as a schoolboy he had been convinced that at some point the US would launch a nuclear war on the USSR.

Whilst he was pleased his sons had not had to live under the same shadow, one negative consequence was that for the last 18 years the issue of nuclear non-proliferation had been 'neglected', not least because the US and Russia had failed to build a sustained partnership on the issue.

South Asia, the place where many experts fear a nuclear exchange is most likely, was well represented at the conference with retired Foreign Minister Shaharyar Khan from Pakistan pointing to President Zardari's recent offer of a no-first strike agreement to prevent their spread.

Shankar Bajpai, former Indian Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, remarked on India's statesmen arguing for nuclear abolition for many decades.

Many challenges

If the idea of getting to zero is having any traction, then getting the support of key leaders will be vital.

During his election campaign, US President-elect Barack Obama expressed his support for the goal of disarmament.



Queen Noor and Richard Branson believe a ban can be achieved

"This is the moment to begin the work of seeking the peace of a world without nuclear weapons," he told a large crowd in Berlin in July.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin expressed similar sentiments in a speech in September when he talked of how it would be better to "close this Pandora's box".

The challenge for Global Zero is not only that the new President already has a full in-tray domestically and internationally but that even within the narrower confines of nuclear proliferation issues, the immediate challenges of dealing with Iran and North Korea's nuclear ambitions may consume much of Washington's attention in the short term.

Iranians were absent from the Paris conference and Richard Burt acknowledged that it would be hard to achieve Global Zero if Iran did acquire nuclear weapons.

"It's a real showstopper," he acknowledged. Israel with its undeclared nuclear arsenal have to participate in any process, Burt said.

The conference moved on to Moscow and then on Thursday to Washington DC. The aim is to spend the next year working on a plan that could lead to a phased nuclear reduction which would eliminate all nuclear weapons in 20 to 25 years.