News

A motorcade transporting the International Atomic Energy Agency expert mission arrives at t

A motorcade transporting the International Atomic Energy Agency expert mission arrives at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the course of Ukraine-Russia conflict outside the Russian-controlled city of Enerhodar in eastern Ukraine Sept. 1, 2022. (CNS photo/Alexander Ermochenko, Reuters)



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Washington — September 9, 2022

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Four weeks of debate -- during a review conference for a treaty widely viewed as a cornerstone of nuclear disarmament -- resulted in no consensus on how to move forward despite the efforts of the Holy See, disarmament advocates and non-nuclear nations.

Russia blocked agreement on a final document late Aug. 26, the review conference's final day, by objecting to paragraphs raising concerns about military activity around

the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine.

The 10th Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) at the United Nations headquarters in New York led to widespread consensus on numerous issues related to nuclear safety, but could not satisfy the Russian delegation's objection even though the document did not mention Russia by name.

Maryann Cusimano Love, associate professor of international politics at The Catholic University of America, attended the conference as an expert consultant to the Holy See Mission at the U.N.

She told Catholic News Service that the Holy See's participation in the review conference and its consistent voice in urging the world to abolish nuclear weapons was critical, especially at a time when fears remain that nuclear weapons may be introduced to the war in Ukraine.

Early in the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin put his country's nuclear forces on alert, but has since backed off any suggestion that he would authorize the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

The review conference brought delegations from around the world to New York to discuss next steps toward fulfilling the treaty's goal of the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons. Originally scheduled for 2020, it was delayed three times because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Among the treaty's provisions is a requirement that parties to it "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament."

Disarmament advocates say that not enough has been done to achieve that goal.

The delays in convening the review conference did not deter disarmament advocates, who have worked behind the scenes for more substantive action toward limiting the spread of nuclear weapons and full nuclear disarmament on the part of the five nations that originally signed the treaty in 1968: China, France, the Soviet Union, with rights since assumed by Russia, United Kingdom and the United States.

However, their efforts were thwarted when Argentine Ambassador Gustavo Zlauvinen, president of the review conference, announced late Aug. 26 that no

consensus had been reached.

Cusimano Love said the Holy See's consistent message of calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons and for the peaceful use of nuclear energy stems from its conviction that human life and dignity must be protected, particularly in a politically polarized world.

"It's a key voice to raise the moral issues and to be able to try to reach out across these very highly politicized lines," she said of the Holy See's work.

She also said that while the Russian objection was the main focus coming out of the meeting, the 35-page draft document offered numerous other steps related to nuclear safety, reducing nuclear arsenals and protecting human life that conference delegates can pursue going forward.

Bishop David J. Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, was among those who lamented the inability of the delegates to reach a consensus statement after nearly a month of negotiations.

In a Sept. 8 statement, he called for the "acceleration and strengthening of the implementation of the NPT and call on all states-parties to recommit to dialogue and demonstrate progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons everywhere"

After Zlauvinen's announcement, the 65 states that have signed the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, including the Holy See, released a statement voicing their disappointment over the outcome. They pledged their support for the treaty, saying it was a necessary step toward an eventual ban on nuclear weapons.

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The ban treaty went into force in January 2021, but has not gained the support of any nuclear-armed nations.

Supporters of the ban treaty also expressed concern that the risk of the use of nuclear weapons in the world today remained high, "and the possibility of the catastrophic humanitarian impact ... is looming ominously over us."

"We are dismayed that this very fact has been used at the NPT review conference deliberations as reason against the urgently needed progress on nuclear

disarmament, and to uphold an approach to security based on the fallacy of nuclear deterrence. This approach relies on the threat of the actual use of nuclear weapons and, hence, the risks of the destruction of countless lives, of societies, of nations, and of inflicting global catastrophic consequences," the statement said.

"We are adamant that the existence of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence doctrines diminish and threaten the security of all states; indeed, they threaten our very survival," it added.

Elsewhere, the executive committee of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions in Brussels was among Catholic Church-connected organizations expressing concern that the review conference ended without a consensus document.

Committee members in an Aug. 31 statement observed that "the world seems to have regressed into a new Cold War dynamic" because of Russia's war with Ukraine.

"Eroding respect for the principles of international law, including arms control agreements, undermines trust within the international community. Along with renewed strategic rivalry among nuclear powers and evolving technologies, this makes the scenario of an international or accidental nuclear detonation very real," the statement said.

Steadfast nuclear disarmament advocates were critical of the lack of consensus, saying it was business as usual orchestrated by the nations that have nuclear weapons, including the United States and Russia.

"It was very disappointing, but honestly not very surprising," Mary Yelenick, Pax Christi International's main representative at the U.N., told CNS.

She said that the U.S. and other nations "are using the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an excuse to say whatever it is they want to say," adding that concerns about "the specter of nuclear conflagration" are being ignored.

In response, non-nuclear nations and nongovernmental organizations advocating the disarmament will place greater emphasis on building support for the ban treaty to pressure the world's nuclear powers to dismantle their highly destructive arsenals.

Nick Mele, a consultant on nuclear disarmament to Pax Christi USA, echoed Yelenick, saying, "posturing" by the nuclear-armed nations in the months leading to the

conference was aimed at upholding the status quo.

"What we saw was, in one sense, kind of the proof that the nuclear armed states are not interested in disarmament as a group," said Mele, who formerly worked for the U.S. Information Agency in East Asia and Africa.

Both Pax Christi disarmament advocates called for grassroots organizing and education to build momentum to enforce the ban treaty.

The next NPT review conference is scheduled for 2026 and preparations for it will begin next year. Cusimano Love said that the short turn around means the momentum to achieve the NPT's goal of shrinking, and eventually eliminating, nuclear arsenals worldwide will build.

Cusimano Love explained that a meeting in Vienna in June of the states that signed the ban treaty developed a 50-point action plan with a timeline that can build toward the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. Such a step -- with specific goals and a timeline -- was being discussed by delegations disappointed by the outcome of this year's nonproliferation treaty review conference, she said.

"Over time," she said, "it has a positive effect as it puts new ideas out there and it brings some pressure both internal in some countries and external in some countries to make greater progress on the goals of the NPT."