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Pushing Obama's vision: A nuclear free world

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

[Editor's note: Fr. Dear posted this column Tuesday, days before President Obama was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.]

When President Obama presided over the United Nations Security Council recently to endorse a resolution to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, we saw a rare sight -- a sign of global leadership pointing humanity toward a new future of peace. But while his words inspired, and hope springs from his symbolic stand, nothing has changed.

Nuclear weapons still abound -- we have 25,000 on the planet -- and the nuclear industry is gathering its forces to keep the weapons in place. If they get their way, they're guaranteed vast sums and we're consigned to being hostages to nuclear terrorism.

Obama called the next 12 months 'pivotal,' and he's right. Here again we have a small window of opportunity. So now is our time to push.

'The historic resolution we just adopted enshrines our shared commitment to a goal of a world without nuclear weapons,' Obama said. 'And it brings Security Council agreement on a broad framework for action to reduce nuclear dangers as we work toward that goal.'

Just one nuclear weapon set off in a major city -- 'be it New York or Moscow, Tokyo or Beijing, London or Paris' -- could kill hundreds of thousands of people and cause major destruction, he said.

Obama spoke of 'four pillars that are fundamental to the future that we want for our children: non-proliferation and disarmament; the promotion of peace and security; the preservation of our planet; and a global economy that advances opportunity for all people.' The first pillar means we have to 'stop the

spread of nuclear weapons, and seek the goal of a world without them ... If we fail to act," he continued, "we will invite arms races in every region, and the prospect of wars and acts of terror on a scale that we can hardly imagine."

All he says rings true, but while he talks, Obama is quietly making deals to keep the nuclear business going. He kept nuclear weapons "pit" production in his budget, and Congress has increased it, keeping the Los Alamos nuclear machine in business. More, he has promised not to press Israel to rid its land of nuclear weapons. The Orwellian "doublespeak" continues -- as do the ruthless U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I've been traveling the past few weeks, lecturing at churches, universities and peace groups, and people seem encouraged by the president's U.N. stand. But, like me, they are fully aware that little has changed. Most know that the wars continue, that our troops still menace the world's poor, and that Los Alamos still brews its ominous stew of destruction.

But these grass-roots activists aren't caving in -- they're carrying on: organizing events, writing letters, doing what they can to disarm the world. They are, by and large, ignored by the mainstream media, but grass-roots work for peace and justice normally is. Little does the media know that change always starts at the bottom.

Last week in Salt Lake City, for example, one activist told me that the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan alone could destroy the whole world, so she keeps talking about it. If India and Pakistan ever launched their weapons, she said, the fall-out would blacken the skies and end life as we know it.

The weapons need to go, she said, and we have to keep working for that goal. Otherwise, we're going to wake up one morning to the surreal news that nukes have been used again. Her peace group continues to speak out about not just the Indian-Pakistani arsenals, but our own. And they're pushing Utah senators to do the right thing regarding the upcoming Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty vote.

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In Bellingham, Wash., as another example, nearly 600 people gathered for the annual International Peace Day events, calling for an end to war and nuclear weapons. As we marched through town and gathered in a church, I was moved by the goodwill and palpable energy of people from all walks of life.

In fact, everywhere I go, I find people doing what they can to make a difference.

Obama said that during the next 12 months, "nations with nuclear weapons have the responsibility to move toward disarmament, and those without them have the responsibility to forsake them." Many peace groups are organizing people to do just that -- to pressure Congress to pass the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty, and the U.N. to pass Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Peace groups are calling us to flood the White House and Congress with letters urging that the obscene sums for the nuclear industry go to fund healthcare, education and environmental cleanup.

They are urging us to pressure the media, hold public events, and keep bringing attention to the need for nuclear disarmament. Some are talking about gathering in New York City next spring during the U.N.'s Nuclear Non-Proliferation Conference.

"When we have leadership in the White House interested in nuclear disarmament, it's time for concerned

citizens to step up their vocal support," Felice Cohen Joppa of "The Nuclear Resister" told me. "If someone says they want to do something positive, we have to let our support be known. It's not a time to be quiet. Obama's got plenty of people who do not support the disarmament agenda. Those of us who do need to be in the streets continuing our protests and speaking out."

"I think what happened at the U.N. with the U.S. taking responsibility and leadership was good," activist Frida Berrigan told me. "Obama's chairing of the Security Council was unprecedented and new. After the Bush administration, it's phenomenal progress. But the Security Council's resolution isn't a roadmap for disarmament. It doesn't get us to zero. It was about counter-proliferation, which isn't disarmament. So there's a lot of work to do. One out of five Americans thinks nuclear war is likely. The U.S. still spends six billion dollars a year on nuclear development. Russia has increased its nuclear spending this year."

"So the months ahead are really important. We have to re-educate ourselves and others. We need to speak about this moment as an opportunity for disarmament and pursue Obama's vision of a nuclear free world. If we want that to happen, we have to be far more engaged. And that's a challenge since there's so much else to do."

Church people especially need to lend their voice to this momentous call for disarmament. As Thomas Merton once wrote, "A genuine Christian spirituality must be profoundly concerned with all the risks and problems implied by the mere existence of nuclear stockpiles."

I hope we can urge our priests to preach about nuclear disarmament, educate our parish communities, hold prayer vigils, lobby and demonstrate for disarmament. Pax Christi offers resources and links for those who wish to get involved. Most of all, we need to beg the God of peace every day for the gift of a nuclear free world.

"The taproot of violence in our society today is our intent to use nuclear weapons," the late Jesuit Fr. Richard McSorley wrote famously. "Once we have agreed to that, all other evil is minor by comparison. Until we squarely face the question of our consent to use nuclear weapons, any hope of large-scale improvement of public morality is doomed to failure." I hope we can all do whatever we can to pursue the vision of disarmament and nonviolence, and help the world move toward that harmonious day of peace.

For information, see: www.globalzero.org, www.nuclearresister.org, www.paxchristiusa.org, www.ucsusa.org and www.newamerica.net. This week, John will speak at St. Joseph's in Indiana, and next week, help host the Pax Christi New Mexico Assembly with guest speaker Fr. Louie Vitale (see: www.paxchristinewmexico.org). John's latest books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace* are available from www.amazon.com. Next month, Orbis Books will publish his new collection, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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