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700 prominent Australians call for nuclear abolition

by Joshua J. McElwee

More than 700 prominent Australians -- including former prime ministers, defense ministers, and Catholic bishops and priests -- have signed onto a statement calling on their country's government to adopt a "nuclear-weapons-free" defense posture and to take steps to initiate a global treaty to abolish nuclear arsenals.

The statement, which was put together by Australians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention and announced Jan. 25, includes signatures from 713 Australians who have received the Order of Australia, an honor granted by Queen Elizabeth II to note achievement or "meritorious service" and similar to a knighthood in the United Kingdom.

Among the Catholics who have signed onto the statement is Cardinal Edward Clancy, who served as the archbishop of Sydney from 1983 to 2001. Jesuit Fr. Frank Brennan, former chairman of the country's National Human Rights Consultation Committee, and Fr. Michael Tate, a former ambassador to the Holy See, have also signed.

Tim Wright, coordinator of the Australian chapter of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, said in an email that the statement should be seen as a "very significant development given the prominence of the people involved."

While the signatories have not called for an end to Australia's military alliance with the U.S., Wright said, they have called for "an end to Australia's participation in U.S. extended nuclear deterrence" and for their government to "reject, categorically, these immoral, inhuman weapons."

Tate, who served nearly two decades in various political roles -- from the Australian Senate, to government minister, to ambassador -- before entering the priesthood in 2000, said in an email that he decided to sign on to the statement partly because the church is entering a "new phase" in "querying the

legitimacy of the use of armed force.?

Beyond that query, however, the priest also said it is ?difficult to see how the use of nuclear weapons, even tactical, could be justified.?

?The long term effects of the release of radiation into the environment has impacts which would almost certainly extend into generations who, by definition, had no part to play in the war,? he said.

Wright said he hopes the statement will lead to Australia joining some 146 other nations that have responded to a call by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for a treaty to outlaw and eliminate the weapons.

?We will work with the signatories to keep nuclear disarmament on the political agenda. We will convey to legislators the urgent necessity of eliminating nuclear weapons,? Wright said. ?We hope that campaigners in other countries will launch similar campaigns to build support for a ban on nuclear weapons.?

Tate also recalled a landmark opinion rendered by the International Court of Justice on the issue of nuclear weapons in 1996. That opinion, known as the *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, is one of a select few juridical decisions on the question of nuclear weapons use. Among seven questions legal experts from 14 countries attempted to answer was whether the use of nuclear weapons would be ?contrary to the rules of international law.? On that particular question the judges split seven to seven.

Tate, who attended the proceedings while serving as Australia?s ambassador to The Hague and the Holy See, said the court had said then that the resolution to the question ?lay in the political sphere? and a new nuclear weapons treaty seems to be ?one of the goals to which international players should direct their energy.?

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Among the list of former government officials who have signed on to the Australian statement are three former prime ministers, two former defense ministers, and four military officers who previously served as armed force chief, the most senior appointment in the Australian military.

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