

NUCLEAR WEAPONS ONCE MORE AN EXISTENTIAL ISSUE

Written by John Hallam

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PND's and the Human Survival Project's nuclear weapons campaigner John Hallam is attending the Third Conference on Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons in Vienna Dec8-9.

Nuclear weapons -and their possible use- are once more looming as an issue that, potentially at least, threatens human survival. This is in spite of global legal commitments to rid the world of them that should have been fulfilled decades ago.

A series of conferences will be held in Vienna Austria around this issue in early December. The main conference is the 8-9Dec intergovernmental 'Third International Conference on Catastrophic Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons', at which some 155 Governments as well as NGOs and academia are to be represented. It is hosted by the Government of Austria. In addition, there will be a very large NGO conference hosted by ICAN (International Campaign for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons), and a briefing by the Government of the Marshall Islands on their legal case against the US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, the UK, France, Israel and the DPRK over their alleged noncompliance with Art VI of the NPT and customary international law.

More ominous however, have been a number of statements repeatedly reminding the world of Russia's nuclear capabilities, which are indeed formidable. Russia currently has just one warhead more than does the US; However it is arguable that their nuclear forces are in a better state and that their morale is better, than those of the US, recently hit by a series of scandals.

Still more worrying are suggestions in the last few days by some that Russia may think they can 'win' a nuclear exchange.

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Nobody – US, Russia, or anyone else – 'wins' a nuclear exchange. Indeed, analysts of the global climatic effects of large scale nuclear weapons use speak of 'self – assured destruction', whereby even if one side of a nuclear exchange were to not retaliate at all, the massive amounts of smoke released by the burning of cities and military installations would create such a deep global climatic impact that even the agriculture of faraway countries including the country that launched the attack would be ruined for decades. It is complete nonsense to speak of 'winning' a nuclear exchange.

Nonetheless, recent media commentary on nuclear weapons repeatedly suggests that there is 'a new cold war' or that 'world-war – III' is back on the agenda. Indeed it does seem that the apocalypse may indeed be back from the 1980s.

The derailment of global nuclear disarmament efforts, and their replacement by massive and costly nuclear upgrades in both the US and Russia, as well as the rapidly growing Indian and Pakistani (and now the Chinese) nuclear arsenals, coupled by a rattling of nuclear sabres ought to be cause for extreme global concern and action to reverse what could, if enough things go wrong, turn into a civilization-ending apocalypse.

It doesn't have to be this way. The apocalypse doesn't HAVE to be back on the agenda – it is we who put it there and it is we who can remove it. These issues will no doubt be talked through at much length in Vienna, and the hope is that in the elegant Hofburg Palace, once home to the Hapsburgs, an outbreak of outrageous commonsense at some plenary or diplomatic reception will replace a drift over the precipice with genuine progress to the actual elimination of nuclear arsenals that is mandated by art VI of the NPT.

Yes, the apocalypse IS back on the menu of possibilities. But – like Ebola – the right menu of sensible actions agreed in Vienna and at the upcoming 2015 NPT Review conference can remove it. It is up to us.

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