

THE FIGHT FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, yet the threat of a nuclear war still hangs over humanity almost a century later...

BY *Chris Menon*





“I STILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER THAT MORNING. At 8:15, I saw a blinding bluish-white flash from the window. I remember having the sensation of floating in the air. As I regained consciousness in the silence and darkness, I found myself pinned by the collapsed building. I began to hear my classmates’ faint cries: ‘Mother, help me. God, help me.’

“Then, suddenly, I felt hands touching my left shoulder, and heard a man saying: ‘Don’t give up! Keep pushing! I am trying to free you. See the light coming through that opening? Crawl towards it as quickly as you can.’ As I crawled out, the ruins were on fire. Most of my classmates in that building were burned alive. I saw all around me utter, unimaginable devastation.

“Processions of ghostly figures shuffled by. Grotesquely wounded people, they were bleeding, burnt, blackened and swollen. Parts of their bodies were missing. Flesh and skin hung from their bones. Some with their eyeballs hanging in their hands. Some with their bellies burst open, their intestines hanging out. The foul stench of burnt human flesh filled the air.”



THIS IS THE personal testimony of Setsuko Thurlow, who as a 13-year-old survived the US dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. That act on August 6, 1945, killed an estimated 146,000 men, women and children.

In the years since, the world has lived under the shadow of a nuclear war that could effectively destroy humanity, whether by accident or design. The threat of a nuclear war is particularly acute today: the weapons that exist now are much more powerful than those deployed in 1945—a Hiroshima-type bomb would now be considered small. There are also many more of them (roughly 13,500), held by nine nuclear countries (the US, Russia, the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea).

Although agreements between

the US and Russia brought down the numbers of nuclear weapons from their peak in the 1980s, the world could soon be faced with a nuclear arms race as all the nuclear powers modernise and expand their arsenals, while some countries that don't have them seek to obtain them.

The increased risks of nuclear war have been recognised by those leaders and scientists responsible for the Doomsday Clock, symbolically, putting it at 100 seconds to midnight [See Box 1].

Noam Chomsky, the world renowned philosopher, linguist and political activist told *Reader's Digest*: "It moved closer to midnight than it's been since its first setting in 1947. The threat of nuclear war is one reason. Last August, President Trump dismantled the Reagan-Gorbachev INF Treaty and immediately tested weapons that violate the treaty. He has indicated that he may not sign the New Start Treaty, which essentially terminates the arms control regime that has significantly lessened the dire threat of nuclear war. Diplomacy, the only hope, has increasingly been sidelined in favour of provocation and force. Unless this disastrous course is reversed, not just on the part of the world-dominant power, prospects for survival are dim."

Chomsky's concerns over the prospects for the world surviving might appear overblown to those

DOOMSDAY CLOCK

Maintained since 1947 by members of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the Doomsday Clock is a metaphor for threats to humanity from unchecked scientific and technical advances. The Clock represents the hypothetical global catastrophe as "midnight" and the Bulletin's opinion on how close the world is to a global catastrophe as a number of "minutes" to midnight. The main factors influencing the Clock are nuclear risk and climate change. The Clock's original setting in 1947 was seven minutes to midnight.

In January 2020, the hands were moved from 2 minutes to 100 seconds to midnight. It is now closer to midnight than at any point since its creation in 1947.

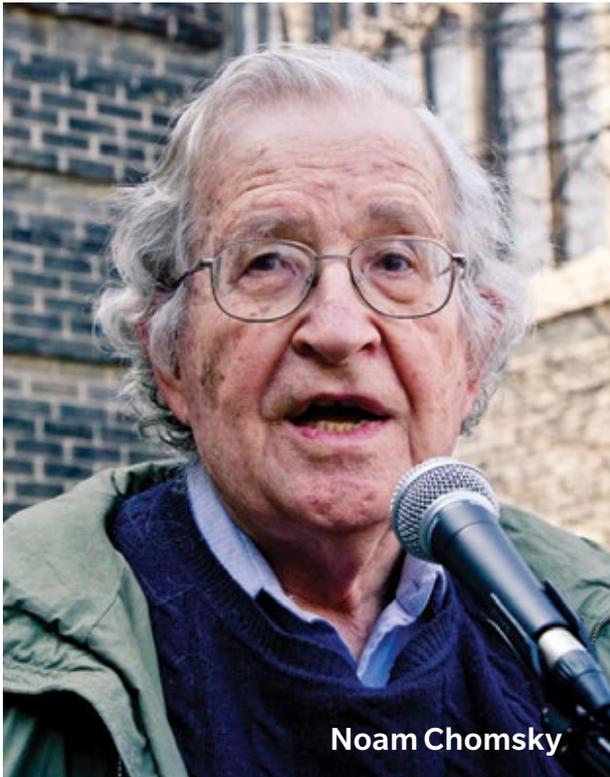
A statement issued by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists explains: "Humanity continues to face two simultaneous existential dangers—nuclear war and climate change—that are compounded by a threat multiplier, cyber-enabled information warfare, that undercuts society's ability to respond. The international security situation is dire, not just because these threats exist, but because world leaders have allowed the international political infrastructure for managing them to erode."



unfamiliar with the number of close calls that have already taken place. Yet it is well documented that on many occasions the world has come chillingly close to a global nuclear armageddon between the US and Russia, while lesser "accidents" abound. Kate Hudson, General Secretary of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, confirms: "Over the past 75 years nuclear weapons have been used twice in war and dozens of nuclear accidents have brought the world to the brink of annihilation." [See box 2]

Climate scientists have modelled that even just a one-sided, first strike by either Russia or the US would be likely to produce a pyrrhic victory in the form of a "nuclear winter," with global temperatures dropping below freezing over land, even in summer, for a decade. Alan Robock, the US climatologist who is currently Distinguished Professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences at Rutgers University, explains: "The resulting climate changes, triggered by smoke, would be so damaging to food and water supplies that infrastructure breakdown would assure starvation in the attacking country as well as the rest of the world. Call it self-assured destruction, or SAD."

Even a regional nuclear war would prove calamitous. For example, according to research by Robock and other climatologists,



Noam Chomsky

“The proliferation of nuclear weapons indicates that humanity still hasn't grappled with the existential threat they pose”

a war between India and Pakistan that detonated approximately 290 nuclear weapons of varying yields, could immediately kill between 50 million and 125 million people in both countries. It would also cause huge global climatic effects, as smoke and debris would rise up to the upper atmosphere and block the sun, cooling the planet's surface by several degrees for about five years.

PHOTOS: ©ANDREW RUSK

The resultant reduction in crop yields would then lead to famine affecting many millions, perhaps even billions.

Given that even first use of nuclear weapons is likely to be suicidal for the user, Hudson clearly has a point when she says: “the proliferation of nuclear weapons indicates that humanity still hasn't grappled with the unique existential threat nuclear weapons pose. Disarmament really is the only way to secure our survival.”

Fortunately, there are some who recognise the threat posed by nuclear arsenals and one very encouraging landmark event occurred with the adoption of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on July 7, 2017. On that day 122 countries took a critical step towards making that nuclear-weapon-free future a reality.

Beatrice Fihn is executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) which won the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for helping to pass the TPNW. In an exclusive interview she explained its significance: “It marked the moment the world decided that these weapons do not belong in an international system based on rule of law. It's one of those historic achievements, together with the bans of biological weapons, chemical weapons, landmines and cluster munitions.”

For those countries that are

party to it, the treaty prohibits the development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. For any nuclear armed state joining the treaty, it provides for a time-bound framework for negotiations leading to the verified and irreversible elimination of its nuclear weapons programme.

1983 NEAR MISS

In 1983 a satellite early-warning system near Moscow reported the launch of one American Minuteman missile. Soon after, it reported that five missiles had been launched. Convinced that a real American offensive would involve many more missiles, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov of the Soviet Air Defence Forces refused to acknowledge the threat as legitimate and continued to convince his superiors that it was a false alarm until this could be confirmed. Thankfully, Stanislav Petrov helped prevent the outbreak of a devastating nuclear war that would have destroyed humanity.



In order to come into effect, signature and ratification by at least 50 countries is required. As of November 25, 2019, although 80 states have signed it, only 34 states have ratified the treaty. Partly, this is because of bureaucratic delays as it can easily take up to two years for the domestic legislation to ensure national law is compliant with the TPNW. Sadly though, the nine countries generally recognised as possessing nuclear weapons were noticeably absent from the negotiations, as were most members of NATO. Japan, despite being the victim of atomic attacks in 1945, also boycotted the meeting.

Fihn is perplexed by this, as she explains: “The TPNW is a multilateral treaty that allows for a government to negotiate the exact process and timeline of its disarmament of nuclear weapons. So if nuclear armed states want to proceed with multilateral disarmament, they can do so under the treaty.”

US-based Ploughshares Fund, which invests to promote nuclear disarmament, estimates that the nine nuclear states are planning to spend at least US\$1trillion modernising their nuclear weapons over the next decade, with the US making up 60 per cent of that and the UK five per cent. Tom Collins, its Director of Policy, admits: “I do not think the US is serious about eliminating nuclear weapons. Obama supported



the eventual goal of elimination, but wound up supporting a complete rebuilding of the arsenal and rejecting the TPNW. Trump has no intention of moving toward zero, and wants to build up US forces.”

Yet, Collins believes UK moral leadership could make a world of difference. “The UK could and should be the first nuclear power to sign the TPNW. The UK does not need nuclear weapons (it is under the US nuclear umbrella) and could gain international prestige by being a leading advocate for elimination.”

It’s a huge role that Kate Hudson believes Britain must take on. “If Britain cancelled its Trident replacement scheme, our present nuclear weapons system would retire in about ten years’ time. We should use those ten years to sign up to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition

of Nuclear Weapons and become a serious player on the world stage for disarmament and diplomacy.”

Collins urges citizens concerned about the threat posed by nuclear weapons to call on their governments to sign the TPNW and move to eliminate nuclear weapons. In addition, Robock advises: “Support leaders who make getting rid of nuclear weapons a priority. ICAN is a coalition of many organisations, so you cannot join, but join your local organisations, such as CND.”

Reversing the steady drift towards another nuclear arms race that further increases the likelihood of eventual annihilation won’t be easy but it is possible. Chomsky envisages it will take “something like the major popular campaigns of earlier years to reduce the terrible threats and rid us of this curse.” ■