

Nobel Prize Perspective: The Past is Ever Present

The profile of a Nobel Prize-winning scientist is a regular feature in Helix. In this edition we switch the focus to prizes for peace, profiling International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985.

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The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent end of the Cold War might have been an appropriate moment for anti-nuclear war protesters to savour some quiet relief, hang up their banners and go into retirement. For the doctors' pressure group International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) there was the added satisfaction of knowing that its persuasive lobbying had a direct influence on the Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, one of the prime movers in the termination of the Cold War.

The IPPNW won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 for its work to end the threat of nuclear war, and with the truce between the us and Russia, the organization would have been entitled to believe that the time had come to rest on its laurels. It is fortunate for us that this prestigious group did not do so. Nine years on the mood of optimism has soured, and the IPPNW continues its campaigning in a world where the nuclear threat is as great as ever.

There are, of course, countless pressure groups that had in the past, and are now, campaigning against nuclear war. What made IPPNW stand out in the eyes of the Nobel committee? What is the rationale for an anti-nuclear organization to be composed only of physicians? And would IPPNW not be more influential if it opened its membership to anyone prepared to campaign against weapons of mass destruction?

As Mary Wynne Ashford, Co-President, expressed it in her address to the IPPNW's 14th World Congress, in Paris last June, "We are not a group of activists who happen to be doctors: we are doctors first, committed to easing suffering and death. We bring that commitment to the global stage in our attempt to prevent the ultimate suffering and death of nuclear war." As a grouping of physicians, IPPNW is able to drive one point home more forcefully than any other anti-nuclear pressure group; there is no meaningful medical response to a nuclear war, making it the greatest threat there is to the health of everyone. It follows that prevention is the only rational course. As doctors, the members of

IPPNW believe they have a special responsibility to ensure that governments and the public understand the horrific nature of the threat. That the horror is not limited to the vast scale of the immediate death and injury, but will reverberate, as radiation-driven mutagenesis devastates future generations.

A great strength of the IPPNW is that from its formation in 1980, it has bridged political and ideological divides. The founders, Professor Bernard Lown of the Harvard School of Public Health and Dr Yevgeny Chazov, of the USSR Cardiological Institute, united the medical profession across the divide of the Cold War. The founders obviously caught the prevailing mood: within five years (and before the ease of Internet communication) IPPNW had 145,000 members in 40 countries. Not only did IPPNW encapsulate the fears of physicians worldwide, it organized and marshalled this collective disquiet so forcefully that in 1985 the movement was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In terms of Alfred Nobel's will, the Peace Prize is awarded to the individual or group which has "done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." IPPNW was honoured for its important contribution to activating opposition and mobilizing opinion against nuclear arms.

Awarding the prize on 10 December 1985, Egil Aarvik, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, noted that the prevention of an outbreak of nuclear war was increasingly regarded as a question of life or death for the human race. In short, "We have the choice between living together or ceasing to live at all."

"These physicians have told us what will happen if these weapons were to be used. We know now about the atomic winter with its destruction of the biosphere and of all conditions necessary for life." He described how the IPPNW has shown there is no escape route, no feasible protection against an atomic catastrophe. "Home defence and medical services would inevitably collapse; it would be impossible to help the injured and dying, and survivors would be subjected to the murderous long-term consequences."

But despite his assessment of IPPNW's contribution to the cause, in the depths of the Cold War in 1985, Aarvik was very discouraging about the likelihood of any reductions in nuclear arsenals. He pointed out that "innumerable" disarmament conferences had produced little results. "Possibly," he told the audience, "all we can hope for now is a stronger mobilization of public opinion, and a corresponding strengthening of pressure on the political authorities."

For such public pressure to be effective it has to be independent of ideology, politics and geography. By setting it up as a non-partisan, neutral organization, with members on both sides of the Cold War debate, the founders placed IPPNW

in a unique position to get across the global message: All humanity faces an equal threat; there can be no victors of a nuclear war.

As the Russian President Nikita Krushchev put it, "No one will be able to see the difference between capitalist and communist ashes."

Ending the Cold War

IPPNW used the prestige conferred by winning the Nobel Peace Prize to redouble its efforts, amongst other strategies, sending annual delegations to decision-makers in nuclear weapons states. President Gorbachev, architect of perestroika and a prime mover in the détente that ended the Cold War, acknowledged the extent of IPPNW's influence in his memoir, *Perestroika*. "It is impossible to ignore what these people are saying. What they are doing commands great respect. For what they say and what they do is prompted by accurate knowledge and a passionate desire to warn humanity about the danger looming over it."

"In the light of their arguments and the strictly scientific data which they possess, there seems no room left for politicking. And no serious politician has the right to disregard their conclusions."

Perestroika was followed by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of Warsaw Pact governments across eastern Europe. In the early 1990s, for the first time in four decades, the threat of all-out nuclear war receded.

A New Mandate

But the impact of so-called conventional war on human health remained as potent as ever. In 1993 IPPNW expanded its mandate to read, "IPPNW seeks to prevent all wars, to promote nonviolent conflict resolution, and to minimize the effects of war and preparations for war on health, development and the environment."

Changes in military strategy have resulted in increasing the proportion of civilian deaths, so that civilians now make up 95 per cent of the deaths in war. At the same time, the tactic of targeting infrastructure cuts off water, electricity and fuel supplies, destroys sewage systems, agriculture, and food distribution networks, threatening survivors with starvation and disease. As Professor Lown noted in 1988, "Premature death, disease, hunger, illiteracy and hopelessness everywhere on earth are the direct consequence of the militarization of social priorities."

"Development and disarmament are indissolubly linked. One cannot achieve the former without achieving the latter." Although the principle focus remains the

abolition of nuclear weapons, IPPNW is also working towards the broader goals of peace and health. As a result it has involved itself in other causes such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Jubilee 2000 Debt Eradication Campaign which aims to eliminate the debts developing countries owe to developed countries, and the International Action Network on Small Arms.

IPPNW began campaigning against land mines which it describes as "weapons of mass destruction in slow motion" at the end of the Cold War in 1992. The scale of the problem is enormous. It is estimated that there are 100 million mines spread across the land masses of 64 countries. The worst affected countries are Afghanistan with 10 million; Angola 15 million; Bosnia six million; Cambodia 10 million; Croatia six million; Kurdistan 10 million; Mozambique three million; Vietnam 3.5 million. Between 25 to 30 people per day are killed by mines, and 40 maimed. Most are civilians.

A single mine costs about 3.3 euros to buy. To find and clear it costs around 334 to 1100 euros. Mines are expensive and tedious to clear but the alternative is that they are detonated 'limb by limb'. The United Nations estimates that at the current rate of progress, it will cost over 35 billion euros and take 1000 years to clear all the mines currently in the ground.

IPPNW is working with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a body which was itself awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Through its wide-flung membership, IPPNW has developed the land mines campaign in Russia and the former states of the Soviet Union and in Africa. It is also publishing a book, 'The Primary Care of Landmines Injuries in Africa' in an attempt to improve treatment for casualties, who are often in remote areas where the appropriate surgical skills are unavailable.

Although the problem of mines that have already been planted seems intractable, it is hoped the 1997 international 'Treaty to Ban Antipersonnel Mines' will reduce their use in the future. Similarly, small arms claimed three million lives in wars between 1990 and 2000. The IPPNW has given itself the mission of informing the medical community about the small arms epidemic and the injuries they cause, as a member of the International Action Network on Small Arms.

"Weapons violence has reached epidemic proportions in many countries from poor to rich," says Michael Christ, IPPNW's Executive Director. A preventative approach is necessary to address the root causes of weapons distribution and violence in society. IPPNW is also working for the elimination of foreign debt, owed by developing nations to rich creditors, including many governments, in developed countries. "Debt is a health problem," says IPPNW. The debt burden on many countries is a major cause of poverty, and poverty is known to be a key determinant of poor health.

Furthermore, IPPNW believes that debt is linked to nuclear arms. The burden of debt is "perpetuated through the global political, military and cultural dominance of the beneficiaries of the debt the rich states of the world and this dominance is backed by conventional and ultimately nuclear weapons."

The Threat of Nuclear War Re-emerges

As the new millennium dawned, the euphoria of the early 1990s gave way to a more sober appraisal. While the size of nuclear weapons arsenals peaked in the 1980s, there remain approximately 30,000 warheads today. Some 5000 of these weapons are on hair-trigger alert, ready to be launched at a few moments notice. Even if all existing arms control treaties are fully implemented, there will still be 20,000 warheads in 2003. As the IPPNW's Co-Presidents, Ashford, Sergei Gratchev and Ronald S. McCoy, put it in IPPNW's 1999 Annual Report, "We remain poised perilously close to the nuclear abyss."

In particular, India and Pakistan now have nuclear bombs; more and more countries, including Iran and North Korea, have the missile technology to deliver nuclear weapons; and in October 1999 the us Senate voted down the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The world is awash with plutonium, and military and economic disarray in Russia make it more dependent than ever on nuclear weapons as conventional forces deteriorate.

In the face of these threats, IPPNW is going, 'Back to Basics,' with a renewal of the orga-nizing and educational efforts that brought it to prominence in the 1980s. "As the euphoric domestic response to nuclear tests in India and Pakistan proved, there is much to be done to educate both the medical profession, government leaders, and the public about the medical and environmental consequences of nuclear war."

IPPNW is also stepping up its efforts to secure acceptance of a model Nuclear Weapons Convention (nwc). Drafted by IPPNW, nwc is a highly detailed road map, which takes the elusive goal of abolition and provides a route to achieving it. Nwc was officially submitted to the United Nations by the government of Costa Rica, and has become a rallying point for the nuclear abolition movement. At the beginning of this year, a new front opened in the campaign for nuclear disarmament, with the announcement by the George W. Bush administration, that the us is to go ahead with the us National Missile Defense Program, or son of Star Wars. According to the us Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the aim is to create a defensive shield to knock down any missile fired at us targets.

But IPPNW takes an opposite view. Ashford says it will "reverse the progress made in decades of disarmament agreements, by undermining the abm [Anti Ballistic Missile] Treaty and by stimulating a new arms race."

"The world is at a fork in the road. If we allow the us missile defense system, we cannot achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons. Either we go in the direction of missile defence and a new arms race, or we go in the direction of de-alerting and eliminating nuclear weapons. We cannot go both ways."

As it renews its efforts to eliminate nuclear arms, the IPPNW intends to take the argument over the Missile Defence System directly to the us government. It will challenge the assumptions underlying this programme at its 15th Congress to be held in May this year in Washington DC.

In all of its campaigns, IPPNW is sticking to its original principle to make the medical reality of nuclear war part of the reality of nuclear policy making. And its basic premise that only an informed public can effectively be organized to oppose nuclear arms is as true today as it was when IPPNW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in the pessimistic depths of the Cold War.

Despite renewed and emerging nuclear threats, IPPNW is hopeful. "We remain optimists, because we are physicians. We believe in healing, both at an individual and societal level."