



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Nuclear Arms Treaties
February 2011

...I firmly hope that, during the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference to be held this May in New York, concrete decisions will be made towards progressive disarmament, with a view to freeing our planet from nuclear arms.
-- Pope Benedict XVI, January 1, 2010

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the cornerstone of global efforts to curb and reverse the spread of nuclear weapons. 198 countries have ratified the treaty, including the five acknowledged nuclear powers: United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, and China. Only four nations have not: India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea. The NPT prohibits non-nuclear states from acquiring nuclear weapons (non-proliferation), requires nuclear states to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons (disarmament), and guarantees access to peaceful nuclear technology (nuclear power). Both the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty are important to preserving support for the NPT.

Years ago President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev called for abolishing all nuclear weapons. More recently, former Secretaries of State and Defense George Shultz, William Perry and Henry Kissinger and Senator Sam Nunn have promoted a nuclear-free world. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev have committed “our two countries to achieving a nuclear free world.”

New START Treaty: In 1991, the United States and Soviet Union ratified the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). This treaty limited the number of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles (missiles and bombers) that each country could deploy to 6,000 warheads and 1,600 delivery vehicles. The treaty also incorporated a solid set of verification measures the two nations could use to monitor each other’s nuclear arsenals and compliance with the treaty.

In 2002, the U.S. and Russia adopted the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), known as the Moscow Treaty, which would reduce the number of warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 by the end of 2012. As with previous reductions, an indeterminate number of the weapons “cut” from the arsenals would be stored, not dismantled. Under this “good faith” arrangement there are no verification measures and thousands of tactical (short-range) nuclear weapons are not covered. SORT expires on the date its reductions become mandatory in 2012.

Today the United States and Russia still hold about 90% of all nuclear weapons, large arsenals left over from the Cold War. START expired on December 5, 2009 and with it the verification protocols, but both nations agreed to keep its provisions in effect while they negotiated a START follow-on treaty. Implementation of a New START Treaty was critical because verification ensures transparency and even modest reductions in the number of weapons can set the stage for future reductions. President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia signed a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) on April 8, 2010. The New START Treaty reduces deployed strategic warheads to 1550, 30 percent below the existing ceiling; limits both nations to no more than 700 delivery vehicles; and includes new verification requirements. In December 2010 the New START Treaty was ratified by the Senate on a solid bipartisan vote of 71 to 26.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Despite U.S. involvement in initiating negotiations for a test ban treaty, in 1999, the U.S. Senate failed to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that would stop nuclear testing. Some Senators who voted “no” expressed concerns about the ability of the United States to maintain its arsenal in the absence of testing and others were concerned about verifying compliance with the treaty. Prominent scientists have argued that the U.S. can safely maintain its nuclear arsenal without testing and that the ability of the international community to verify compliance is amply demonstrated by detections of tests in North Korea. The Obama Administration supports ratification of this treaty that 151 other nations have ratified (including UK, France, and Russia). It is not known if and when the CTBT will be submitted to the Senate for ratification.

USCCB POSITION: The United States and other nuclear powers must move away from reliance on nuclear weapons for their security. A global ban is more than a moral ideal; it should be a policy goal. In a major victory, USCCB successfully advocated for ratification of the New START Treaty in 2010.

In an April 8, 2010 letter to the President, Francis Cardinal George, OMI welcomed the signing of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and urged the U.S. Senate to ratify it. Bishop Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, sent copies of this letter to all senators. Several action alerts were sent to dioceses along with background materials and a Catholic Study Guide based on Catholic social teaching for use with the Nuclear Tipping Point DVD. Bishop Hubbard alerted all of the bishops to these efforts and asked them to contact their senators. A significant number of bishops throughout the country gave interviews, wrote op-eds, and contacted their senators.

USCCB has urged the Administration and Congress to view arms control treaties not as ends in themselves but as steps along the way to achieving the goal of a mutual, verifiable global ban on nuclear weapons. Much deeper, more irreversible cuts, in both strategic and tactical weapons, are both possible and necessary. The Holy Father said on January 1, 2008: “It is truly necessary for all persons of good will to come together to reach concrete agreements aimed at an effective demilitarization, especially in the area of nuclear arms.”

USCCB plans to support Senate ratification of the CTBT if and when it is introduced. In his September 2009 letter to the Senate, Bishop Hubbard, stated “the moral support of the Catholic bishops of our nation for concrete steps to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and to advance nuclear non-proliferation with an ultimate goal of seeking a nuclear-free world.” He noted that “Senate action will be needed to help our nation to secure loose nuclear material, strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, [and] ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.” The positive example of the U.S. ratifying CTBT will be important to international efforts to address nonproliferation and the successful control of nuclear materials in this age of terrorism.

The Church opposes the use of nuclear weapons, especially against non-nuclear threats, and the development of new nuclear weapons. While possession of a minimal nuclear capability may deter the use of nuclear weapons by others, the Church urges that nuclear deterrence be replaced with concrete measures of disarmament based on dialogue and multilateral negotiations. In its nuclear policy the U.S. should commit to never use nuclear weapons first and to reject use of nuclear weapons to deter non-nuclear threats.

USCCB has expressed support for the Global Security Priorities Resolution (H.Res.278) introduced by Congressmen McGovern and Lungren. This resolution linked long-term savings derived from reducing our nuclear arsenal to increased support for nuclear nonproliferation efforts and child survival programs. This legislation did not move forward in the last Congress.

ACTION REQUESTED: If introduced,

1. Urge members of the Senate to support ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).
2. Urge members of the House to support the Global Security Priorities Resolution.

For further information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/warandpeaceind.shtml> or contact Stephen Colecchi, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace, USCCB, 202-541-3196 (phone), 202-541-3339 (fax), scolecchi@usccb.org.

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