

"Nuclear Weapons Cannot Be Justified and Deserve Condemnation"

Excerpt from a statement by Archbishop Renato Martino, the Holy See's permanent observer at the United Nations, to the United Nations' First Committee, October 15, 1997. After expressing support of the Holy See for the recently developed treaty to eliminate land mines, he stated:

If biological weapons, chemical weapons and now land-mines can be done away with, so too can nuclear weapons. No weapon so threatens the longed-for peace of the 21st century as the nuclear.

Let not the immensity of this task dissuade us from the efforts needed to free humanity from such a scourge. With the valuable admonition offered in the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, the international community can see the legal and moral arguments against nuclear weapons intertwine with the strategic: since nuclear weapons can destroy all life on the planet, they peril all that humanity has ever stood for and indeed humanity itself.

During the acrimonious years of the Cold War with the emphasis on the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence as a constant justification for the nuclear arms build-up, the international community felt powerless to stop the relentless build-up of nuclear weapons. Not now, in the post-Cold War era characterized by new partnerships, the international community cannot shield itself from the assault on life itself that nuclear weapons represent.

The work of this Committee has done in calling for negotiations leading to a Nuclear Weapons Convention must be increased. Those nuclear weapons States resisting such negotiations must be challenged, for, in clinging to their outmoded rationales for nuclear deterrence, they are denying the most ardent aspirations of humanity as well as the opinion of the highest legal authority in the world. The gravest consequences for mankind lie ahead if the world is to be ruled by the militarism represented by nuclear weapons rather than the humanitarian law espoused by the International Court of Justice.

Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st century. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation. The preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to their abolition.

The Holy See has previously stated in this Committee: "The world must move to the abolition of nuclear weapons through a universal, non-discriminatory ban with intensive inspection by universal authority". Today we repeat those words, conscious that there is a gathering momentum of world opinion in support of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. This is a moral challenge, a legal challenge and a political challenge. That multiple-based challenge must be met by the application of our humanity.