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FILMS

"Talking about nuclear disarmament"

Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala

TRANSCRIPT (FILM 1)

(interview recorded 5 December 2009 at the Royal Society of London)

Ambassador Dhanapala has had a highly distinguished career in government, the United Nations and academia. His diplomatic career for the Sri Lankan government and as Under-Secretary General for Disarmament at the United Nations has spanned 40 years. He leads or is otherwise centrally involved in many highly respected international NGOs and think tanks, including Pugwash, recipients of the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize. He was chair of the pivotal Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review & Extension Conference in 1995.

"Well, as a Sri Lankan diplomat I must confess that I have been profoundly influenced by the philosophy of the Buddha, which is essentially a non-violent philosophy, and also by the example of Mahatma Gandhi of India. And as a consequence I devoted a great deal of my professional life toward the pursuit of peace and disarmament, representing my country in the conference on disarmament. But I think the major high point of my diplomatic career was when I was President of the NPT Review and Extension Conference of 1995, because on that conference decision hinged the entirety of the NPT's future.

Now since 1995, except for the success of the conference of 2000 when I was no longer representing my country but was the UN Under-Secretary General for Disarmament and we had a collective effort to try to make sure that the '95 decision was vindicated, and we did, there has unfortunately been a slide since then, and I find that more and more countries are resigning from the commitments they made, both in '95 and in 2000. In 2000 there were thirteen steps that were agreed to, and the unequivocal undertaking of the nuclear weapon states that they would eliminate nuclear weapons. But during the entire period of 2000 until today we have not seen that happen.

It is only with the emergence of President Obama that we have this unique opportunity of seeing the fulfillment of the commitments that were made. But we've also seen backward steps with regard to non-nuclear weapon states, with the North Koreans leaving the Treaty and testing twice. We've also seen questions being raised with regard to Iran and Syria. So we need to restore confidence and faith in the NPT. And I believe very strongly that international peace and security can be achieved by having the rule of law imposed, and by having treaties that are strong and robust and which have verifiable means of ensuring the obligations both by the non-nuclear weapon states and the nuclear weapon states. Because this is a bargain that was entered into when the Treaty was negotiated, and is now almost 40 years since it entered into force. It is the only treaty in which the nuclear weapon states multilaterally commit themselves to nuclear disarmament. So they must fulfill their bargain, and the non-nuclear weapon states must also fulfill their promises to remain non-nuclear.

The nuclear weapon is unquestionably the most destructive weapon that humankind has invented, and it hung over the international community like a shadow throughout the period of the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War, which is 20 years ago now, we all I think were lulled into a sense of false complacency, thinking that the threat of a nuclear exchange was no longer there. But in fact the centrality of the nuclear weapon issue is once again reappearing. It has reappeared for several reasons. One is that we have the problem of climate change, where countries are now moving away from carbon-emitting fuels, and looking to developing nuclear

energy, and with that come more and more dangers of people diverting from the peaceful uses of nuclear energy to non-peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Secondly we have the problem of international terrorism and the fact that we know that there are groups like Al-Qaeda who are looking for nuclear weapon materials and technology, and they will use it unhesitatingly for their nihilistic purposes.

So we have this new phenomenon of weapons of mass destruction terrorism. And then of course we have more and more countries who are acquiring nuclear weapons. Today there are three countries, and probably four if you count the North Koreans, who are outside the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and completely untouched by the disciplines of that treaty. And it is likely that more and more countries will acquire this weapon because as long as countries see nuclear weapons as a badge, as it were, of nuclear-weapon-power status, they want to acquire it.

So we need therefore to move rapidly towards a verifiable nuclear weapon convention, which will outlaw nuclear weapons. And I think that is what is at the heart of the problems that we have, because the promises in the past of nuclear disarmament have not been fulfilled as speedily as possible.

There is a new sense of urgency now with regard to the nuclear weapons issue. And that has been introduced I believe at the highest level by President Obama and it is I think being subscribed to by other nuclear weapon states. So we have this combined effort both on the part of the nuclear weapon states and the non-nuclear weapon states to move rapidly towards the nuclear weapon-free world.

I think following the op-ed articles that appeared in the Wall Street Journals of 2007 and 2008 by George Schultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry and Sam Nunn – there are similar articles that have appeared in Germany, in Britain here, in the French Republic, as well as in many other countries, and these are all supportive of the vision of a nuclear weapon-free world. I think that convergence of opinion is very important. We also have the United Kingdom talking about converting the United Kingdom into a disarmament laboratory and taking some steps with regard towards that, by having a decision to have only three Trident systems and not four. We have the French also with President Sarkozy announcing new initiatives. We have the Germans talking about removing US nuclear weapons from their soil.

We have a number of ground-swell movements at the level of civil society. There is a Global Zero movement, which was launched in December last year where a hundred people assembled in Paris and launched this objective of having a global zero. The plan is by 2030 to have this achieved. We also have another commission sitting at the moment led by Gareth Evans of Australia and Madame Kawaguchi of Japan who are likely to come out with a report early in 2010, also calling for the eventual achievement of a nuclear weapon-free world, but of course in verifiable stages.

So there is therefore a common movement now that is taking place, and it is very perceptible that after long years of relatively inactive debates, and inconclusive debates on the issue of nuclear weapons disarmament and non-proliferation, we are finally beginning to see some significant movement.

I believe very soon that we will converge and come to a common agreement as to what steps we need towards having the elimination of nuclear weapons. But I think we do all agree on the goal, and that is global zero, a nuclear weapon-free world. How long it will take to get there is the subject of dispute at the moment.”

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