

Doctors against nuclear weapons

In the context of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May, 350 medical professionals from India prepared and signed the following "Call for World Peace", appealing to both governments to forsake the nuclear option altogether.

This statement was released on August 6, Hiroshima Day, at a public function at Stella Maris College, Chennai, by Dr. AS Thambiah, recipient of the BC Roy Award. Some of the prominent signatories are Dr. B Ramamurti, Voluntary Health Service, Chennai; Dr. A.S. Thambiah, Emeritus Professor, Madras Medical College, Chennai; Dr. CN Devanayakam, Superintendent, Hospital for Thoracic Diseases, Tambaram, Chennai; Dr Sunil Pandya, neurosurgeon, Jaslok Hospital, Mumbai, and editor of *Issues in Medical Ethics*; Dr. NH Antia, former member of the Planning Commission, Government of India.

A CALL FOR PEACE

On this day, some 50 years ago, the first nuclear weapon was used. The whole city of Hiroshima was erased from the face of this earth. About one lakh human beings, including women and children who had nothing to do with war or politics, became corpses in the wink of an eye. Many of those who survived died agonising deaths due to burns and cancers. We, the members of the medical profession spend our whole lifetime fighting illnesses and trying to save individual lives. We know that nuclear weapons are like no other weapons; medicine is helpless before its horrifying consequences.

Therefore we are deeply saddened that the governments of India and Pakistan have field-tested nuclear weapons which are far more destructive than the one dropped on Hiroshima. We hold that nuclear weapons cannot solve any of the problems of the people of this subcontinent. On the other hand

they can start a very costly and senseless arms race which would impoverish the region, and lead to an enormous increase of poverty-related diseases.

There is nothing that can be achieved by mere possession of nuclear weapons. They cannot guarantee a victory in tactical warfare. Vietnam proved that beyond any doubt. They cannot guarantee the stability of a country. The disintegration of the former USSR proves that. On the other hand there is nothing that cannot be solved by dialogue held with mutual respect.

The people of India and Pakistan face similar problems. Any problems between us should be settled by dialogue—after all what could not be settled by two wars cannot be settled by a third one—even if it is a nuclear one. Perhaps the only certainty of a nuclear war is mutually assured destruction.

We, the members of the medical profession, on this day remembered the world over as Hiroshima day, appeal to the governments of India and Pakistan to abandon the nuclear option altogether and return to the negotiating table. This we do in the name of the innocent victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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In the July-September 1998 issue, IME carried a draft statement by the Medico Friends Circle on the nuclear issue. The statement was finalised at the MFC mid-annual meet on July 8 at Sewagram. We carry, below, the final statement:

The health aspects of these developments are as important as their political dimensions, but have hardly been debated in public. In protest against the nuclear tests in

India and Pakistan, the MFC presents the following critique of the 'nuclear technology' from a health perspective.

The nuclear explosions have violated our moral and ethical sense as health professionals. In all health systems the upholding of life is of highest professional value. Acts which threaten life are against the basic tenets of our profession. The exploding of nuclear bombs and efforts towards the development of weapons of mass annihilation are symbols of the most extreme violence by the state against people. We therefore oppose the nuclear explosions in principle and practice.

Is the bomb pro-health or anti-health? We are living only 50 years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Out of the combined populations of the two cities of six lakh, nearly two lakh died in the immediate aftermath of the bombings; children were born with increased birth defects; survivors continue to have increased rates of cancers; and genetic changes may be handed down for many generations. Since then 340 nuclear accidents have occurred globally resulting in 3037 cases of significant nuclear exposure and 116 deaths. Nuclear bomb testing (similar to those conducted by our two countries) in the Marshall islands by the United States in 1965 resulted in acute radiation syndrome, thyroid cancer and cataracts to the islanders. The storage of nuclear bombs and weapons exercise have resulted in 50 accidents, none of which have so far led to radiation fallout. It has been predicted that if a bomb of the intensity of that used at Pokhran were to be dropped on any major Indian city, it would result in between two and eight lakh deaths within a few days. The nuclear explosions should be viewed in the light of previous disasters and the human suffering they caused. Obviously the worst possible health

damage of being a non-nuclear nation is preferable to the hazards of developing, testing and stocking nuclear weapons, not to mention the likelihood of their use under grave provocation.

There is a paucity of information about the health effects of the use of nuclear technology in our country. The government maintains that no radiation was released above the surface of the ground during the nuclear explosions. But have there been any studies after the 1974 and the present explosions to assess the health impacts? What has been the effects to the underground ecosystems and to the water aquifers?

Even the peaceful use of nuclear power is surrounded by safety concerns and lack of information. Radioactive leaks have been reported from the Rajasthan atomic power station (RAPS). There has been anxiety about the exposure of nuclear plant personnel to excess radiation. And what about the environmental and biological consequences of dumping nuclear waste onto tribal land and into the sea? Nuclear waste from reactors continues to be radioactive for more than 20,000 years and if released into the environment has devastating consequences to natural ecosystems and food chains.

The present secrecy that surrounds our nuclear programme will be further legitimised in the interests of national security. The people of India have a right to be informed and to debate the hazards of nuclear technology both for peace and for war.

There is also the question of whether the government and the medical community are prepared for a nuclear disaster. When the Chernobyl reactor exploded in the USSR in 1986, within minutes a medical disaster plan went into operation. The sick were immediately transported to equipped hospitals, the plant workers decontaminated within a few hours and 1,35,000 people were evacuated from the area within days. Six thousand medical personnel from all over the

country arrived to medically evaluate and treat the evacuees. The effectiveness of the response is evident from the mortality of only 30 among the 230 plant workers who developed acute radiation syndrome.

In this context, we must ask, what are the safeguards and medical contingency plans at our nuclear plants and weapons installations? The inept handling of the Bhopal gas tragedy, the plague epidemic in Surat and the recent typhoon in Gujarat leave grave concern of our ability to cope with a greater kind of medical tragedy.

Do the goals of the government and the scientific establishment which developed the nuclear bomb reflect the needs and aspirations of the people in our country? We who are so proud of our achievement have not yet addressed issues such as: one fifth of our people go hungry every day; two-thirds of our children suffer from malnutrition; the commonest causes of death in our country are diarrhoea, malnutrition, respiratory infections, TB and malaria. While becoming the sixth nuclear power, we are still 155th in rank on the human development index. The central health budget allocation for this year is only 10.2 per cent of the defence budget. The entire health budget (Rs. 3,700 crore) of the union government for this year is less than the increase in funding for defense. "It is those who are not ashamed to be poor who are in need of the bombs."

Do our scientists have responsibility for the horrendous human suffering that results from the technologies that they create?

Mr. Vajpayee himself wrote in a poem entitled "Pain of Hiroshima": The scientists who invented nuclear weapons, / How could they have slept at night? / Did they for a moment feel / That what happened through their hands was not good? / If they didn't, / History will never forgive them. (*translated from Hindi*)

As health professionals and scientists today, are we being complicit in the use of science for narrow political

ends? The present government is using the nuclear explosions to further its political agenda of creating a 'macho state'. The espousal of weapons of mass destruction by the government and the scientific community as a method of power, challenges the notion of 'value-free science' or 'science of the public good'. We must remember that the scientific community provided the justifications and the means for the horrors of the German concentration camps and creation of a Nazi state. Are we being systematically involved in a similar project?

In the light of the health critique, the MFC makes the following demands of the government:

- a commitment not to perform further nuclear testing,
- a commitment never to use nuclear weapons,
- a commitment to stop all further research and development of nuclear weapons systems,
- a commitment to disseminate information to the public regarding the health hazards of nuclear testing, reactors, weapons system and nuclear waste disposal; the safeguards at nuclear installations to prevent such disasters; the medical contingency plans in the event of a nuclear disaster; the environmental consequences of nuclear testing and nuclear waste disposal.

The MFC would also like to state our commitment to regional peace through dialogue. Our country's safety is of fundamental priority. Gandhiji taught us to use non-violent means to obtain our freedom and security. Yet 50 years later we are asked to rely on weapons of mass destruction to maintain that freedom.

While we criticise India and Pakistan, we are against all nuclear weapons and against the nuclear hegemony maintained by the five nuclear states. We advocate global disarmament and maintenance of regional peace through dialogue and not through nuclear deterrence.