

Canada's "lonely" stand in favour of nuclear disarmament

The Cold War has been over for more than a decade and there's an increasingly warm relationship between Russia and the US, but the 4000 nuclear weapons they possess between them still represent the equivalent of 80 000 Hiroshima blasts.

And Senator Douglas Roche says that's one reason why it is important for Canada to remain a leader in the drive to rid the world of these weapons.



Anti-nuke protest during another era: Montreal, Nov. 10, 1961

In October, Canada was the only NATO member to vote in favour of a UN resolution calling for a world free of nuclear weapons. Three NATO countries — the US, United Kingdom and France — voted against it, while the rest abstained.

Roche and other members of the Middle Powers Initiative (MPI), a group of 8 international nongovernmental organizations, were in Ottawa to lobby Parliament to continue along the path toward disarmament. Included in the meeting were International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and its Canadian branch, Physicians for Global Survival.

The UN resolution that Canada supported echoed a 13-step plan to eliminate nuclear weapons that most countries endorsed in 2000 during a review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

That treaty was signed in 1968 and became law in 1970. The only non-signatories in 2002 were India, Israel and Pakistan, but the failure of NATO countries to support the resolution in October suggests a potential weakening of resolve.

Canada's solo stand impressed Roche: "It's a signal of where Canada

wants to go, but it seems to be a lonely position."

He and other MPI steering committee members, including former Prime Minister Kim Campbell, urged Ottawa to become a bridge between NATO and other countries interested in nuclear disarmament. The UN is to review the NPT again in 2005.

There is no doubt that the events of Sept. 11, 2001, have had an influence on NATO's stance, but Bruce Blair, president of the Center for Defense Information in Washington, DC, says the US has "learned the wrong lessons from 9/11."

Rather than continuing to disarm, he said the US has resumed nuclear testing and development of new types of tactical nuclear weapons, and has opened 5 new plutonium disposal pits. Blair said nuclear weapons still "represent ... a danger, [particularly] if they were to fall into the wrong hands."

Roche ended the Ottawa meeting with a reminder of the massive task ahead. "We work on this today, hoping that one day our children will be looking in awe at the world that we built for them, and it will be one without nuclear weapons." — *Barbara Sibbald, James Maskalyk, CMAJ*

US OKs new rapid HIV test, approval to be sought in Canada

A test to detect HIV infection that provides results within minutes has been licensed for use in the US, but the manufacturer has yet to seek approval to sell it in Canada. Approval of the new test by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) came after the sale of 2 other rapid tests was halted in Canada.

The FDA says the OraQuick Rapid HIV-1 Antibody Test, which requires a finger-prick blood sample, detects antibodies to HIV within 20 minutes, with a sensitivity of 99.6%.

Tommy Thompson, the US secretary of Health and Human Services, says this type of point-of-care testing is vital. "Each year," he says, "8000 HIV-infected people who come to public clinics [in the United States] for HIV

testing do not return a week later to receive their test results."

Approval of the new test in the US came 6 months after another manufacturer agreed to halt the sale in Canada of 2 rapid HIV tests after their accuracy was challenged (see *CMAJ* 2002;167[2]:180).

Ryan Baker, a Health Canada spokesperson, would not say if the new test is being reviewed by Health Canada because that information is considered proprietary.

Bill Bruckner, a spokesperson for OraSure Technologies, said the company intends to market the device in Canada but is currently concentrating on rolling out the product for the US market.

He said the price is expected to be in the US\$20 range. About 17 million HIV

tests are conducted annually in the US, but this does not include those done for blood banks.

Jane Greer, director of Toronto's Hassle Free Clinic, says that facility would welcome the return of a rapid test. Staff at her clinic in the heart of Toronto's gay village saw 22 000 patients in 2001. The clinic is one of the busiest testing sites for sexually transmitted disease in Canada.

Greer says the earlier withdrawal of the rapid tests manufactured by BioChem ImmunoSystems (now Adaltis Inc.) may have affected patient confidence, but the ability to offer immediate results remains attractive. "We'll be following this fairly closely," she said. — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*