



Petition 2011/1 of Edwina Hughes and 904 others

Report of the Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade Committee

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Recommendation

The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee has considered Petition 2011/1 of Edwina Hughes and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Introduction

We have received and considered the petition of Edwina Hughes, which requests

that the House of Representatives, as a matter of urgency, address my petition calling on the House to urge the government to actively engage with “like-minded” governments committed to abolishing nuclear weapons to launch, without delay, an initiative to start the process of negotiating a nuclear weapons convention – a treaty to prohibit the development, production, testing, deployment, stockpiling, transfer, threat of use, and use of nuclear weapons.

In a submission to the committee the petitioner, the coordinator of Peace Movement Aotearoa, pointed out the leading nuclear disarmament role the New Zealand Government took by passing the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act in 1987. She also noted that New Zealand was one of six governments that led the Oslo Process to ban cluster bombs, which resulted in the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, and called on the Government to take a similar leading role in bringing about a nuclear weapons convention.

On 22 March 2012 we received and heard evidence from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade advising that the prospects of successfully negotiating such a treaty at present are poor.

Background

Peace Movement Aotearoa, established in 1981, provides national coordination for the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons Aotearoa New Zealand (iCAN ANZ). Along with Peace Movement Aotearoa, 17 other non-governmental organisations and three other iCAN national organisations wrote letters in support of the petition. These letters were appended in a list of supplementary information to the main submission.

Peace Movement Aotearoa submitted that a fast-track diplomatic process for abolishing nuclear weapons was necessary because existing lines of negotiations such as the Conference on Disarmament and the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons were deadlocked and unable even to decide on a possible programme of work. They argued that there was overwhelmingly high public opposition to nuclear weapons, as well as the considerable state support (146 governments support the immediate commencement of negotiations leading to a nuclear weapons convention, and only 26 are opposed) and that negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention need to be commenced urgently.

Peace Movement Aotearoa believes the New Zealand Government is well placed to play a leading role to secure a nuclear weapons convention as it is one of the few states with legislation prohibiting nuclear weapons. It is also held in high regard for its past disarmament and arms control efforts. Among the states most supportive of a nuclear weapons convention are Austria, Costa Rica, Ireland, and Norway. These states, together with New Zealand, led the processes for the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and, it was argued, would make ideal partners to lead negotiations on a treaty to similarly ban nuclear weapons.

Evidence from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade told us that there are no serious moves afoot at an international government level to initiate negotiations on a convention. In their view a nuclear weapons convention was not comparable with those on cluster munitions, as nuclear weapons are central to strategic defence postures, and the major powers would be reluctant to participate in any such negotiations.

The ministry believes that New Zealand needs to deploy its resources where they would have the most effect—at present, on practical measures to lessen the importance and number of nuclear weapons and reduce the threat they pose. New Zealand is currently involved in two separate groupings of countries that debate these issues. One, the New Agenda Coalition group of countries (New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, Egypt, South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil) works within the United Nations on nuclear disarmament in the context of nuclear non-proliferation treaties. In another such grouping (New Zealand, Switzerland, Chile, Malaysia, and Nigeria), New Zealand has been working to address the number of nuclear weapons in existence.

Conclusion

On balance we believe that the time is right for the New Zealand Government to support a nuclear weapons convention. We see New Zealand's geopolitical role as one of pushing the boundaries towards peaceful resolutions. It has been traditionally ahead of the pack in matters of disarmament, and this is a good opportunity to take an active role regarding the abolition of nuclear weapons, as it did regarding cluster munitions. New Zealand has had a significant impact in this area and we look for this to continue.

While New Zealand is involved with the New Agenda group, their talks are at an impasse. This presents an opportunity to align ourselves with like-minded countries such as Costa Rica and Malaysia. While the ministry says our energies are best spent on measures to achieve small practical steps, we believe a more forthright and proactive approach to the issue is appropriate. The President of the United States recently provided momentum by articulating a vision of a world without nuclear weapons, and we believe now is an opportune time to push for all countries to abandon such weapons.

While we acknowledge the difficulty, complexity, and cost of negotiating a convention, we believe New Zealand should move beyond a position of general support to the forefront of negotiations towards a nuclear weapons convention.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was referred to us on 21 December 2011. We received written submissions from the petitioner and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We heard evidence from the petitioner and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on 22 March 2012.

Committee members

John Hayes (Chairperson)

Hon Phil Goff

Dr Kennedy Graham

Hon Tau Henare

Dr Paul Hutchison

Su'a William Sio

Lindsay Tisch