

CD Ends First Session of 1997 Without Mandates for Negotiations

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By Howard Diamond

The 61 nation UN Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva ended its first 1997 session on March 27 without achieving agreed mandates for negotiations or establishing the necessary bodies in which to conduct them.

Beginning its work on January 21, the world's principal multilateral arms control forum was unable to set an agenda beyond the eight basic items first promulgated in 1978, now considered a formality. Many countries hoped that the CD would keep up the momentum of last year's Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and make rapid progress on a global fissile material cutoff treaty and on an anti personnel landmines ban. However, competing priorities of the Western nations on the one hand and the non aligned movement (NAM) states on the other compounded by the CD requirement to work only by consensus have prevented formation of any ad hoc committees in which negotiations could begin.

The United States and most other Western countries want the CD to focus on what they believe is a more pragmatic agenda, in particular, negotiating a fissile material production ban and a global landmine ban (see ACT, January/February 1996). The NAM, led by India, insists that the immediate aim of the CD should be establishing a timebound framework for nuclear disarmament which would include the fissile material ban.

According to one U.S. official familiar with the CD negotiations, "The countries blocking the fissile material cutoff treaty by linking it to a timebound framework are the same ones trying to protect their own [nuclear weapons] programs." The United States maintains that the CD is the wrong place to negotiate nuclear reductions, arguing that agreements such as START I and II, among nuclear weapon states, are the best way to make large reductions in nuclear arsenals.

Attempting to bridge the gap between supporters of immediate fissile ban negotiations (such as the United States, Russia, Britain and France) and the non aligned, which wants to subsume a fissile cutoff within a timebound framework for nuclear disarmament, Japan proposed establishing a special coordinator to identify the nuclear disarmament issues with the greatest potential for fruitful negotiations and to report back to the conference before the end of the final 1997 session. New Zealand suggested establishing a nuclear disarmament committee that would immediately begin with the fissile material cutoff negotiations, while also considering longer term issues. However, both sides are unwilling to make compromises that look like concessions, and these proposals received little support.

The CD will hold two more sessions in 1997, the first from May 12 to June 27 and the second from July 28 to September 10. A U.S. official suggested little progress was likely in the second session, but movement was possible in the third. According to the official, "There's a waiting game to see which side will crack." In the absence of a major breakthrough or change in position, the CD may accomplish little this year.

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