



MAKING WAVES

GUEST WRITERS SHARE THEIR PERSONAL VIEWS ON NUCLEAR-RELATED TOPICS

BY ANGELA LEUKER

A grim, unwanted legacy

The nuclear inheritors can help forge historical change. Yet many young people today are unaware of the existence of global nuclear arsenals.

In a recent series of interviews with the CTBTO, a number of experts on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation discussed how young people today are shocked when they learn that nuclear weapons still exist in the world – and how they feel cheated that earlier generations have let this situation continue. International security specialist Patricia Lewis calls them the nuclear inheritors.

I guess that makes me something of a nuclear ancestor, even if an unwilling one. Growing up in the UK in the 1960s, I wore the iconic Ban the Bomb logo on my clothes and draped it across my bedroom walls; I knew all of the lyrics to Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall'; and I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Aldermaston to London marches. I worried about the probability of nuclear war. But then, like most people, I somehow got used to living in the shadow of the mushroom cloud and moved on with my life.

Still, as a nuclear ancestor, I'm constantly surprised by the fact that so many people today are unaware of the continuing threat of nuclear weapons. It's as though in the euphoria following the end of the Cold War, the peace fairy waved her magic wand and nuclear arsenals disappeared forever. Well, sorry

to disappoint you, folks, but there are still some 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world today, with nearly 2,000 of them chillingly described as 'on hair-trigger alert'. Just think about those numbers for a minute and digest their meaning. They portend a holocaust of unimaginable proportions.

Of course there are occasional spikes in the public's attention, like those triggered recently in connection with the precise nature of Iran's nuclear programme or whether North Korea will conduct a third nuclear test. But these days it's the issues of political repression, climate change, or the profligacy of the financial world that move people, especially the young, to raise their voices and protest. Images of an impending nuclear war do not keep mankind awake at night.

It's said this is because the fear factor has been neutralized. It faded with the dramatic improvement in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, the world's two major nuclear powers, in the late 1980s, and disappeared almost completely with the subsequent collapse of the Warsaw Pact and reunification of Europe. Instead of the nightmare of a deliberate nuclear attack provoking a cataclysmic global war, people on both sides of the former divide woke up to a more hopeful future.

How things have changed! Back in the 1950s and 60s, the nuclear threat was almost impossible to avoid. For a start, nuclear testing was commonplace; even announced in the media with a certain sense of national pride. At the same time, the air was thick with accusations fired backwards and forwards between Cold War foes. The face-off created the feeling of living on a nuclear precipice, especially for a public who, back then, generally believed what they were told.

Over the years, as the worldwide peace movement grew and developed its muscle, protest actions against nuclear weapons produced some stunning results, such as the CTBT. Yet here we are, decades later, and even if the gut-wrenching fear has gone, the threat of a nuclear conflict caused by accident or design is patently real.

Now, more than ever, it's time to build a groundswell of opinion to bring about real and lasting change. These days, thanks to modern communications techniques, there is the potential to galvanize people into action on an unprecedented scale. But for that to happen, we all have to work together and share the responsibility, young and old alike. And that means that the nuclear inheritors must be made unequivocally aware of the true nature of their grim legacy.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ANGELA LEUKER

is a writer and multi-media producer. She worked for more than 20 years as journalist/bureau manager in Time Magazine's Central Europe Bureau before joining the Media and Outreach Section of the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2006. She has been a member of CTBTO's Public Information team since March 2011.