

STATEMENT BY ALBERT SCHWEITZER
WITH REFERENCE TO THE
PRESENT NUCLEAR CRISIS IN THE WORLD

IN THREE PARTS

Part II and Part III will be released
on April 29 and April 30, respectively

PART I
PLEASE OBSERVE RELEASE DATE AND HOUR

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In April of last year I raised my voice, together with others, to draw attention to the great danger of radioactive poisoning of the air and the earth, following tests with atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs. With others, I appealed to the nuclear powers to come to a workable agreement to stop the tests as soon as possible, at the same time declaring their genuine desire to renounce the use of nuclear weapons.

At the time, there appeared to be a reasonable hope that this step would be taken. It was not. The negotiations in London last summer achieved nothing. The conference arranged by the United Nations in the autumn of last year suffered the same fate when the Soviet Union withdrew from the discussions. The question of nuclear arms control, however, cannot be put aside. Any discussions among the major nations will have to consider this problem.

As a first step in any comprehensive plan for workable arms control, the proposal for a cessation of nuclear tests has frequently been advanced.

What are the chances that this first step will be taken?

One might have thought that it would be comparatively simple for all those involved to agree on this first step. No nuclear power would have to sacrifice any of the atomic weapons in its possession. The disadvantage of not being able to try out new bombs or nuclear devices would be the same for all.

The United States and Great Britain have been reluctant to take the first step. They spoke against it when the matter was discussed in the Spring of 1957. Since then many statements have been directed against the view that the radiation following nuclear tests is so dangerous that it is necessary to stop them. The American and European Press have been receiving abundant informational materials from government atomic commissions in behalf of continued testing.

From an official statement coming from the United States, we read the following: "Within the framework of scientific and military requirements, it is advisable that nuclear tests are limited to a minimum. The necessary steps should be taken to correct the present confusion of the general public. The present and potential effects on heredity from the gradual increase of radioactivity in the air are kept within tolerable limits. The possibility of harmful effects which people believe to be outside control has a strong emotional impact. The continuation of nuclear

tests is necessary and justified in the interests of national security.”

Despite these assurances, people are becoming increasingly apprehensive concerning the possible dangers resulting from nuclear tests.

The meaning of the somewhat obscure statement that “the effects on heredity from the gradual increase of radioactivity in the air are kept within tolerable limits” is that the number of deformed children that will be born as a result of the harm done to the sexual cells supposedly will not be large enough to justify the stopping of the tests.

The view of the scientists who feel called upon to support the official position concerning the possibility of keeping the level of radioactivity within tolerable limits is expressed by a Central European scientist who concluded a speech on this subject with the following words:

“If the tests are carried out with the same frequency as in the last years, the radioactive poisoning will be four times stronger in 1983 than at present, and about six times stronger around the year 2010. Even that strength would be small compared with natural radiation. It can be stated categorically that the risk for mankind involved in nuclear tests is small. That is not to say that there is no risk. In this context I should like to quote the words of the American physicist and member of the Atomic Energy Commission, Dr. W.F. Libby: 'The risk of radioactive poisoning must be balanced against the risk to which the entire free world would be exposed if nuclear tests were abandoned before a safe international disarmament agreement has been brought about. The tests are necessary if the United States are not to be left behind in the development of nuclear weapons.'”

During this campaign of reassurance, a prominent American nuclear physicist even declared that the luminous watchdials in the world represent a greater danger than the radioactive fall-out of nuclear tests until now.

This campaign of reassurances sets up anticipation of glad tidings to the effect that science has succeeded in making the prototype of a hydrogen bomb with a considerably reduced dangerous radioactive fallout. The new explosive is called a “clean” hydrogen bomb. The old type is being designated as the “dirty” bomb.

The so-called “clean” hydrogen bomb differs from the others in having a jacket made of material which does not, like Uranium 238, release immense quantities of radioactive elements at the enormous explosion temperature. That is why it is less harmful, as regards radioactivity, than the usual ones.

However, the new, highly praised hydrogen bomb is – let it be said in passing – only relatively clean. Its trigger is an uranium bomb made of the fissionable Uranium 235 – an atomic bomb as powerful as the one dropped over Hiroshima. This bomb, when detonated, also produces radioactivity, as do the neutrons released in great numbers at the explosion.

Earlier this year, in an American newspaper, Edward Teller, the father of the “dirty” hydrogen bomb, sings a hymn of praise to the idyllic nuclear war to be waged with completely clean hydrogen bombs. He insists on a continuation of the tests in order to perfect this ideal bomb.

Here are two stanzas from Edward Teller's hymn to the idyllic nuclear warfare:

“Further tests will put us into a position to fight our opponents' war machine, while sparing the innocent bystanders.”

“Clean weapons of this kind will reduce unnecessary casualties in a future war.”

The idea of limited nuclear war is a contradiction in terms. Each side will use all the power at its disposal in an attempt to annihilate the enemy. The United States Defense Department has quite recently declared that the irradiation of whole areas has become a new offensive weapon.

The “clean” hydrogen bomb is intended, I believe, for display case purposes primarily – and not for use. The intention seems to be to convince people that new nuclear tests will be followed by less and less radiation and that there is no real argument for the discontinuation of the tests.

Those who think that the danger created by nuclear tests is small mainly take the air radiation into consideration, and persuade themselves to believe that the... (portion missing)

The results of their arithmetic are, however, not so reliable as they would like us to believe. Through the years the toleration limit for radiation has to be reduced several times. In 1934 it was 100 radiation units per year. At present the limit is officially put at 5. In many countries it is even lower. Dr. Lauriston Taylor (USA), who is regarded as an authority on protection against radiation, holds – like others – that it is an open question whether there is anything called a harmless amount of radiation. He thinks that we can only speak of an amount of radiation which we regard as tolerable.

We are constantly being told about a “maximum permissible amount” of radiation. What does “permissible” mean? And who has the right to “permit” people to be exposed to these dangers?

When speaking about the risk of radiation we must take into consideration not only the radiation coming from the outside, but also the radioactivity that gets into our bodies.

Where is the source of this radioactivity?

The radioactive materials put into the air by nuclear tests do not stay there permanently. In the form of radioactive rain – or even radioactive snow – they fall to the earth. They enter the plants through leaves and roots and stay there. We absorb them by drinking milk from cows or by eating the meat of animals which have fed on it. Radioactive rain infects our drinking water.

The most powerful radioactive poisoning occurs in the areas between the Northern latitudes 10° and 60°, because of the numerous nuclear tests conducted mainly on these latitudes by the Soviet Union and the United States.

The radioactive elements absorbed over the years by our body are not evenly distributed in the cellular tissue, but are deposited and accumulated at certain points. From these points the internal radiation takes place, causing injuries to particularly vulnerable organs. What this kind of radiation lacks in strength is made up for by its longevity, working as it does, day and night for years.

It is a well-known fact that one of the most widespread and dangerous elements absorbed by us is Strontium 90. It is stored in the bones and emits from there its rays into cells of red bone marrow, where the red and white corpuscles are made. Blood diseases – fatal in most cases – are the result.

The cells of the reproductive organs are particularly sensitive. Even relatively weak radiation may lead to fatal consequences.

The most sinister aspect of internal as well as external radiation is that years may pass before the evil consequences appear. Indeed, they make themselves felt,

not in the first or second generation, but in the following ones. Generation after generation, for centuries to come, will witness the birth of an ever-increasing number of children with mental and physical defects.

It is not for the physicist, choosing to take into account only the radiation from the air, to say the decisive word on the dangers of nuclear tests. That right belongs to the biologists and physicians who have studied internal as well as external radiation, and to those scientists who pay attention to the facts established by the biologists and physicians.

The declaration signed by 9235 scientists of all nations handed to the Secretary General of the U.N. By the well-known American scientist Dr. Linus Pauling on January 13, 1958, gave the campaign of reassurance a serious blow. The scientists declared that the radioactivity gradually created by nuclear tests represents a grave danger for all parts of the world, particularly serious because its consequences will be an increasing number of deformed children in the future. For this reason they insist on an international agreement putting an end to the nuclear tests.

One incomprehensible aspect of the propaganda for the continuation of nuclear tests is its complete disregard of their harmful effects on future generations which, according to biologists and physicians, will be the result of the radiation to which we are being exposed.

The declaration signed by the 9235 scientists did well in stressing the danger.

We must not disregard our responsibility for avoiding the possibility that thousands of children will be born with the most serious mental and physical defects. It will be no excuse for us to say that we did not pay enough attention to that danger. Only those who have never been present at the birth of a deformed baby, never witnessed the whimpering cries of its mother, should dare to maintain that the present risk of nuclear tests must be taken. The well-known French biologist and geneticist Jean Rostand calls the continuation of nuclear tests "the future crime" (le crime dans l'avenir). It is the particular duty of women to prevent this sin against the future. It is for them to raise their voices against it in such a way that they will be heard.

In the future the arguments for the continuation of nuclear tests can no longer maintain that the scientists do not agree on the question of the danger of radiation or that one must, for that reason, await the decision of international bodies before saying that radiation represents an actual danger, growing more serious every day.

Despite all the claims of safety, the truth about the danger of nuclear tests marches imperturbably along, influencing an ever-increasing section of public opinion. In the long run, even the most well-organized propaganda can do nothing against the truth.

It is a strange fact that few people have taken into consideration that the question of nuclear testing is not one which concerns the nuclear powers exclusively, a question for them to decide at pleasure. Who is giving these countries the right to experiment, in times of peace, with weapons involving the most serious risks for the whole world? What has international law – enthroned by the United Nations and so highly praised in our time – to say on this matter? Does it no longer look out on the world from its temple? Then take it out, that it may face the facts and do its duty accordingly.

International law should consider at once the compelling case of Japan. That

country has suffered heavily from the effects of nuclear tests. The radioactive clouds created by the Soviet tests in Northeast Siberia and by the American tests in the Pacific Ocean are carried by the winds over Japan. The resultant radioactive poisoning is considerable. Powerful radioactive rainfalls are quite common. The radioactive poisoning of the soil and the vegetation is so heavy that the inhabitants of some districts ought to abstain from using their harvest for food. People are eating rice infected with radioactive Strontium, a substance particularly dangerous for children. The ocean surrounding Japan is at times dangerously radioactive, and thereby the very food supply of the country – in which fish has always played an important part – is being threatened.

As every new nuclear test makes a bad situation worse, the Japanese ministers, when hearing of plans for new tests to the north or south of Japan, have presented their country's urgent appeal in Washington or Moscow, beseeching the American or Soviet authorities to give up their plans.

We generally learn about these appeals and the refusal through short newspaper items. Unfortunately, there have been few responsible editorials drawing our attention to the stories behind the news – the misery of human beings who are now in jeopardy. In that way, we and the press are guilty of a lack of compassion. Even guiltier, however, is international law, which has kept silent and indifferent on this question, year after year.

It is high time to recognize that the question of nuclear testing is a matter for international law to take up. Mankind is imperiled by the tests. Mankind insists that they stop, and has every right to do so.

If anything is left of international law in our civilization, then the nations responsible for nuclear tests must renounce them immediately, without making this dependent on agreements with respect to the larger questions of general disarmament. Nuclear tests have nothing to do with disarmament. The nations in question will continue to have those weapons which they now have.

There is no time to lose. New tests must not be allowed to increase the already existing danger. It is important to realize that even without new tests the danger will increase during the coming years: a large part of the radioactive elements flung up in the atmosphere and stratosphere at the nuclear experiments is still there. It will come down only after several years – probably about fifteen.

The immediate renunciation of further tests will create a favorable atmosphere for talks on controlling the stockpiles of nuclear weapons and banning their use. When this urgently necessary step has been taken, such negotiations can take place in peace.

That the Soviet Union has announced its willingness to stop its tests is of great importance. The world now looks to the United States and Great Britain for the kind of moral initiative and action that go along with great leadership.