

## COMMENT

# The medical profession must stand up against the India-US nuclear deal

**PRAFUL BIDWAI**

Freelance journalist, member of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists against Proliferation and cofounder of the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament INDIA e-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in

Scientists and doctors are constantly told that they must not involve themselves in politics or international affairs because that may have a diversionary or corrupting influence on their professional work and commitments. The proposition has some validity in respect of politics in the narrow sense of party-related activity. But there are some issues of broad or universal significance, on which all citizens with a conscience are called upon to take a position. Racism, apartheid, female infanticide and kidney transplantation from gullible or destitute donors belong to this category. They are ethically totally unacceptable and represent an unmitigated evil, whose very existence should be impermissible in a minimally decent society or one which aspires to a barely civilised status.

Equally important is the issue of nuclear armaments, which are horrifying weapons of mass destruction. So great is the havoc these can wreak that they can potentially destroy all *life on earth* – the only weapons capable of doing so. What makes nuclear weapons unique is that they are quintessentially meant to be used not against soldiers in the battlefield, but against unarmed civilians, targeting whom is forbidden under international law.

The damage caused by nuclear weapons cannot be limited in space or time. Ionising radiation released by them inevitably causes cancer and genetic damage, which is transmitted over many generations. Some of the materials released in a nuclear blast have half-lives as long as 24,000 years or even millions of years.

Nuclear weapons remain a menace to thousands of human generations-in violation of all ethics, including the Geneva Conventions pertaining to the conduct of war. That's why the International Court of Justice declared them incompatible with international law in 1996. Yet, they continue to exist illegally and indefensibly. Nuclear weapons have always confronted scientists with a very special problem, not least because scientists were critically involved in laying out their physical principles, and their development in the Manhattan Project, which produced the first bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. As Albert Einstein famously said, if he had known that the science he developed would be used to produce these horror weapons, he would have preferred to be a watchmaker.

Einstein wasn't alone in this. Scientists and medical professionals everywhere have been in the forefront of the

struggle to abolish nuclear weapons worldwide. In India too, famous scientists such as CV Raman, Meghnad Saha, DD Kosambi and AKN Reddy took a principled stand against nuclear weapons. In 1957, Raman said that scientists should rather starve than make nuclear weapons.

Long years ago, doctors from all over the world formed International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. IPPNW, and its Indian affiliate, Indian Doctors for Peace and Development, have stood up for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. They have educated the public against the nuclear danger which menaces us all. More than one and a half decades after the Cold War ended, the world still has some 27,000 nuclear weapons, enough to destroy it 30 or 50 times over. Millions of Indians and Pakistanis remain vulnerable to attacks by nuclear-tipped missiles, with flight time as short as three to eight minutes. As IPPNW and other peace campaigners have persuasively argued, there is no defence against nuclear weapons—military, civil or medical. Real security lies in abolishing them globally.

These words of wisdom have been all but forgotten in India, where scientists working on nuclear weapons and other military hardware have been given special ranks and pay since the nuclear blasts of 1998.

However, the United States-India nuclear cooperation deal is a good occasion to return to the issue and highlight the responsibility of the scientific and medical professions in fighting this menace.

In early September, the nuclear deal, inked in July 2005 between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W Bush, crossed its biggest hurdle when the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers' Group gave a special waiver to India from its trading rules although India has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty or any other agreement on nuclear restraint or disarmament. By the time these lines appear, it may have been ratified by the US Congress.

Contrary to the name, the US-India civilian nuclear cooperation deal is not just about peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In effect, it will *legitimise* India's nuclear weapons. In turn, India will *sanctify* the nuclear weapons of other countries, including the US, Russia, Britain, France and China. The deal is a patently discriminatory arrangement based on double standards.

Most of our media has put a triumphalist, gung-ho spin on the NSG waiver, calling it a "Nuclear Dawn"; and end to "Atomic Apartheid". In reality, as we see below, it's nothing of the sort. It's a massive setback to the cause of regional and global nuclear disarmament, and will accelerate a potentially ruinous arms race in our part of the world. It also sets a negative example for potential proliferators, who will point to the double standards involved and be encouraged to seek similar favourable treatment for themselves. This can only add to the danger of a further spread of nuclear weapons and make the world even more unsafe.

We must question three claims about the waiver. The first holds it's a victory of "sweet reason". Pranab Mukherjee's September 5 speech convinced half the dissenting six states—Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland— to change their anti-waiver stand. Second, the waiver rights a historic wrong by lifting technology denial wrongly imposed on India after 1974. And third, it will bring India into the global "non-proliferation mainstream".

Mukherjee's vague statement saying India has always opposed proliferation and an arms race doesn't square up with India's record in *initiating and sustaining* a nuclear race in South Asia for three decades. Nor did he offer the much-sought legally binding commitment not to test. The waiver happened *not* for arms-control reasons, but because of crude US arm-twisting of the dissenters, described as "brutal and unconscionable" by former United Nations disarmament undersecretary Jayantha Dhanapala. Regrettably, India too used coercive "with-us-or-against-us" tactics.

Second, "innocent India" wasn't punished "unfairly" for conducting the 1974 test with "indigenously developed" materials/technologies. The critical materials were imported or illegitimately procured. The plutonium for the test came from the CIRUS reactor built with Canadian-US assistance, which was only meant for "peaceful purposes." So the blast was hypocritically called a "peaceful nuclear explosion"! But India cheated the world by diverting civilian material to military use—thus becoming a proliferator. Unfortunately, the NSG made a dangerous distinction between "good" and "bad" proliferators and rewarded India for being Washington's friend. Tomorrow, another country could exploit the distinction. This will undermine the global non-proliferation norm.

Third, the waiver won't bring India into the "non-proliferation mainstream". The deal allows India to produce more bomb-grade material. Under it, India will separate military-nuclear facilities from civilian ones.

However, India will only put 14 of its 22 operating/planned civilian reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. It can use the remaining eight to produce weapons-grade plutonium—estimated as enough for 40 Nagasaki-type bombs annually. India can produce additional bomb-fuel from military-nuclear facilities and fast-breeders.

This *makes nonsense* of India's professed "credible minimum deterrent", understood as a few dozen weapons. (How many bombs would it take to flatten five Chinese or Pakistani cities?

15, 20, 50?) India already has an estimated 100 to 150. Adding to them will accelerate the vicious nuclear arms race with Pakistan, and more ominously, with China.

But is the waiver "clean and unconditional", as India insists? Strictly speaking, no. India formally accepted only one of the three conditions proposed by NSG dissenters: periodic review of compliance with non-proliferation commitments. But the other two conditions—exclusion of enrichment and reprocessing from nuclear trade, and terminating trade in the event of testing—figure in the "national statements" by many countries, including Japan and Germany. So nuclear trade with India will be limited. It will most certainly be terminated if India tests or withdraws from IAEA safeguards.

Joining the Nuclear Club, which the Indian elite has long craved, won't remotely end "Atomic Apartheid". India will merely become another participant in *apartheid's ruling regime*. The last thing India will do on joining the Club is to demand its dissolution! India will inevitably betray its promise to fight for a nuclear weapons-free world.

This puts a huge question mark over the deal's desirability. Maintaining the global nuclear status quo can't give India security. As India itself maintained for half a century, nuclear weapons are an absolute evil, and don't give security.

Again, nuclear power is not clean, safe or cheap. It's the only form of energy generation that can cause catastrophic accidents like Chernobyl and leave radioactive wastes that remain hazardous for thousands of years. Science has found no way of storing them, leave alone disposing of them, safely. Nuclear power cannot give us energy security.

Yet, such vital issues haven't figured in our nuclear debate. The reason? Nationalism, which blinds you to the Elephant in the Living Room and makes you lose your moral-political bearings. As George Orwell put it, nationalism involves "the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation... placing it beyond good and evil, and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests".

This is particularly true of parochial, bellicose nationalism, especially nuclear nationalism. This assumes that nuclear weapons give security and prestige and advance a nation's interests, and must become *the* criterion of sovereignty. Anything that conserves or expands India's nuclear arsenal is good. Anything that limits/impedes this even while promoting a worthy universal cause is unacceptable.

Such views vest sovereignty not in the people, where it truly lies, but perversely, in mass-destruction weapons. They gained currency during the 1995-96 CTBT debate, and have invaded middle class commonsense after the Pokharan-II blasts—a mass-destruction version of *Mera Bharat Mahan*, beyond reproach.

The nuclear deal's advocates and most of its opponents share this premise. This has erased the really relevant issues from the discourse. It's time to put them back there. The medical profession must take the lead in this.