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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNITED NATIONS
AUSTRALIA AND A WORLD WITHOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 24 OCTOBER 1995**

Thank you for coming today to this commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Charter of the United Nations.

I want to give particular thanks to the members of Australia's National Committee for the 50th Anniversary and to its co-chairs, Gareth Evans and Roger Shipton.

The Committee encouraged debate about how the United Nations should respond to the challenges of the next century. It has played a great role as a catalyst, encouraging a very wide range of organisations to create their own anniversary activities. And in a particularly appropriate focus, it has encouraged the involvement of youth in these discussions. We have a vivid illustration of that in the postcards from primary schools all over the country which are displayed around the room.

As we have seen again over the past few days, this 50th anniversary has already generated another round of critical debate about the role and functions of the United Nations. Practically everyone, it seems, has a view of how the UN could operate more effectively, or cost less, or do more, or do less.

This is no bad thing when an organisation matters as much as the United Nations does. I've done it myself. And no doubt I will do it again. But not today. Or not much, anyway.

Because on its 50th birthday the UN is entitled to a bit of a celebration, a reminder to us all of what it has done in that half century to build a more humane, enlightened, tolerant and secure world.

And Australians, especially, should join in the celebrations. Because through all the ups and downs of those fifty years, the UN has had few better friends than this country.

When the Secretary General, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, visited Australia in April to take part in our conference on global cultural diversity he said to me

that he judged countries not so much by their size and GDP as by their ideas and commitment.

In financial terms, Australia is the thirteenth largest contributor to the United Nations. We pay our dues on time and in full. But I think that by the Secretary General's measure we have been even more important to the organisation.

We were there at the beginning of course.

Dr Herbert Vere Evatt, was instrumental in drawing up the Charter. He battled long and hard to ensure that the voice of the smaller nations would be heard in its deliberations.

And the great feminist pioneer Jessie Street, the only woman in the Australian delegation to the 1945 San Francisco Conference, helped to secure in the preamble to the Charter a reference to equality between men and women - the only human right explicitly so mentioned.

Fifty years on, most of you in this room are here because in one way or another you have been carrying on the work of those Australian pioneers.

And many other Australians have been there before you.

Australians were the first peacekeepers to serve under United Nations auspices when we sent military observers to Indonesia in 1947 during the independence struggle. Since then, Australian military and police personnel have served with great courage and distinction in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean.

Australians have a distinguished record as aid workers, as diplomats working on disarmament, as health experts dealing with smallpox or AIDS.

The Australian government and ordinary Australians have been able to contribute, including through one of the world's largest humanitarian resettlement

programs, to the wonderful work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in providing help and sanctuary to the millions of people who have been forced from their homes by conflict and disaster over the past fifty years.

Australians have played a prominent role in the system of human rights protection created under the UN's auspices. Eminent Australians, including people such as Phillip Alston and Elizabeth Evatt, have served in their personal capacity on the expert committees which monitor implementation of the core human rights treaties.

Part of the reason for holding this reception today is publicly to thank all of you and your predecessors for your service to the interests of this country and the international community through the United Nations.

But another reason for this gathering today is to thank the United Nations for what it has done for Australia.

Because the United Nations has given us a forum where nations can resolve differences in an environment bounded by agreed rules and norms. It has provided a space in which the challenges facing humanity can be discussed and our experiences shared.

For all its faults and imperfections, it is impossible to imagine a world without it - without international forums for the discussion of human rights, setting universal standards, and developing measures to prevent human rights abuse. A world without bodies to address issues like the status of women and racial discrimination or to give voice to the aspirations of indigenous peoples.

A world without the capacity to negotiate the pressing trans-national challenges of the environment or to tackle the most difficult problems of economic development.

But in addition to these large issues the United Nations also affects for the better the lives of ordinary Australians through the web of international agreements which have been negotiated under its auspices. These cover issues as diverse as weather monitoring and prediction through the World Meteorological Organisation; improved labour standards and protection of workers' rights through the International Labor Organisation; safety standards in civil aviation and maritime transport; the placement of satellites and even the transfer of mail between countries.

But for all the good work which the UN does in such areas, its ultimate success or failure will have to be judged by the impact it has on international security.

Because above all else, the people who drafted the Charter 50 years ago, who had just experienced a global conflict - the most destructive in all of human history - were motivated by the desire to rid the world of the scourge of war. But their hopes were almost immediately crushed with the coming of the cold war. For the first time, the international community had to contemplate the possibility that another world war would destroy our civilisation.

The UN system has a great responsibility to help the world avoid such a catastrophe. The disarmament goals of the international community are set in resolutions adopted by the General Assembly.

The vital international treaties to turn these goals into reality are negotiated in the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. And the ultimate recourse for enforcing compliance with international disarmament obligations lies with the UN Security Council, as we have seen in the Council's actions on Iraq and North Korea.

This central role of the United Nations makes today's occasion an appropriate one to make a major announcement about Australia's arms control and disarmament policy.

In all the debate and anger over the past months about the French Government's decision to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific, there is one point which consistently recurs in our thinking about the issue.

I have made that point publicly. It is that, however strong our opposition to them, those tests at Mururoa, and China's continued testing, are not themselves the core of the problem. They are instead a symptom of the problem - the deeper and more troubling problem of nuclear weapons in the world.

The reason we have seen such a huge outpouring of public concern about the French tests, not only in this region where they are being held, but also in Europe and Japan and elsewhere, has been a feeling that we have been cheated - robbed of the chance of a world free of nuclear weapons.

With the end of the cold war, we all breathed more easily. We allowed ourselves to think that the nuclear threat, the nightmare of two generations, had finally passed. The thought of nuclear weapons and nuclear war faded from our minds.

But the reality has not faded. Fifty thousand nuclear war heads remain in the arsenals of the five declared nuclear powers. And it is no less real and frightening that others - not just the so-called threshold states of India, Pakistan and Israel, but others like Iraq - wait and work to acquire nuclear weapons.

The French decision to resume testing - announced within weeks of the indefinite renewal of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty - was an outrage and a folly. It has produced an entirely understandable wave of anger around the world. But we may yet be able to derive something positive from it because it has jolted us back to the reality of nuclear weapons in the world.

I now feel a growing certainty that some great good might yet be got out of the present bitterness if we make this the moment to take on the challenge of nuclear weapons.

I believe we can turn the global outrage at French and Chinese testing into something broader and more ambitious - I mean the creation of a world totally free of nuclear weapons.

This has often been talked about in the past, of course. It is a goal which has been forcefully articulated by Professor Joseph Rotblat, who won this year's Nobel Peace Prize. It has long been an aim of Australian policy.

However, to most people, including me, it has always seemed an unachievable ambition, at least in our own lifetimes.

The strategic uncertainties and deep political suspicions of the cold war would surely have made this goal impossible.

But that world has now changed.

We still have conflict, of course. We still have competing national interests.

But the strategic framework in which nations operate has changed profoundly and I believe it is now possible to contemplate getting a concrete program to achieve a nuclear weapons free world.

Because the truth is that the sort of world we now have, with nuclear powers committed to reducing their arsenals and unlikely to use their weapons offensively, will not continue forever. We can be certain of this.

Unless we take action now, the nuclear competition that characterised most of the second half of this century will very likely return - and probably in a much more unstable and multipolar form.

The world must extricate itself from the circular argument that we need nuclear weapons because we have nuclear weapons.

The nuclear powers cannot be excluded from this: they must understand that the most likely threats to their security lie in the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

This is a point we have made often about the French tests and the way they cut across the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the most important arms control treaty ever negotiated within the UN system.

I notice that former French President Giscard D'Estaing made a similar point in an article in the French press on 12 October. He said that "the increase in the number of states, be they big or small, who manage to develop nuclear weapons, now constitutes for France a threat just as serious, if not more serious, than that of a strategic strike decided by one of the rare countries with nuclear weaponry."

I believe that a world free of nuclear weapons is now attainable. It can be done and it will be in the best security interests of Australia and our allies and friends if we do it.

As we saw in the Gulf War, new technology has given weaponry an accuracy that substitutes precision for brute explosive force, and with far less risk to civilians than those from nuclear weapons.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have also seen how real is the potential for catastrophic nuclear accidents.

The Government believes the time has come for more determined movement towards the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

There is no magic wand we can wave to make this happen. As with the long negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament to get rid of chemical weapons, ultimate success may be decades away. And getting there involves security issues of the greatest complexity and profundity. We do not minimise the difficulties or the dangers.

Success depends ultimately on having the will as well as the ambition. The Chemical Weapons Convention, endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1992, has shown that where there is a will there is a way to put the genie back in the bottle. We proved it was possible to rid the world of a whole class of weapons of mass destruction. And the verification problems for a total ban on nuclear weapons should be easier to solve than those for a ban on chemical weapons.

A key building block for a nuclear weapons-free world is already in place with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, article VI of which commits the nuclear weapon states to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament".

But this generalised statement of principle is not nearly enough.

What we need now is action to achieve the abolition of all nuclear weapons.

These are the next steps the Government has in mind.

In our own region we want an end to nuclear testing by France and the closure of the Mururoa test site.

For nearly 50 years - since the beginning of the nuclear weapons era - the Pacific has been used as a testing ground. The Americans began testing in the Pacific in 1946 and continued until 1962; the British tested in Australia from 1952 until 1963; and the French are still testing in French Polynesia.

In 1983 the Australian Government set the objective of ridding the region of testing and began its campaign to declare a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone. With the announcement on 20 October by France, the United Kingdom and the United States that they would sign the protocols of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty in the first half of 1996, we can say that we are on the point of achieving our objective and ending a dark period of the region's history.

The Government's deep regret, of course, is that France is not drawing the logical conclusion from its intention to sign the SPNFZ protocols and ending its tests now - as we urge it to do.

We also want the nuclear weapons states to support the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty, which is being presented to the current session of the General Assembly, as well as the South East Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone which is nearing completion.

We believe that progress towards a nuclear weapons free world would be given a major boost through the creation of linkages between existing or potential nuclear weapons free zones in the South Pacific, Latin American, Africa and the Indian Ocean which already cover most of the southern hemisphere.

Globally, the most immediate priority has to be the conclusion of a genuinely comprehensive test ban treaty by mid-1996, followed by its early entry into force. Australia, together with Mexico and New Zealand, is presenting a resolution to the current session of the General Assembly to entrench this deadline.

In Geneva, Australia has been consulting closely with key countries on ways to expedite the CTBT negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament to take advantage of this opportunity. Over the next few months the Government will be devoting substantial resources - as we did for the Chemical Weapons Convention - to doing what we can to help bring this about.

Next, we want to see the immediate start and early conclusion of negotiations on a convention to ban the production of fissile material for weapons purposes - the so-called "cut-off" convention. And we want to see the development of a regime requiring all states to declare and account for their present stocks of fissile material, as another necessary prelude to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

We want to encourage the further strengthening of international safeguards, in particular by building up the International Atomic Energy Agency's ability to detect illegal undeclared nuclear facilities.

We want universal membership of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, particularly by the nuclear threshold states of India, Israel and Pakistan.

But as I said earlier, Australia is determined to pursue the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

We want the nuclear weapons states to carry out their commitment to the elimination of their nuclear stockpiles by adopting a systematic process to achieve that result.

The next steps towards this are the adherence by the United States and Russia to the destruction timetable under START, and further nuclear reduction agreements between the United States and Russia, with the earliest possible involvement of the United Kingdom, France and China.

We acknowledge the need, as we always have, for a system of stable deterrence to be maintained while the reduction and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is being achieved.

All these elements constitute a program which will set norms for international behaviour, establish new international legal obligations and further develop international control mechanisms which will serve as an essential framework for the safe and secure elimination of nuclear weapons.

I am writing to other heads of government who share Australia's concerns, suggesting that we look at the means by which we can advance the cause of a nuclear-weapons free world. I hope a new coalition of international interests will emerge from these consultations.

As its contribution to this, the Government will establish a group of knowledgeable and imaginative individuals from around the world. In a major series of meetings in Australia, this group will be tasked to produce a report to be submitted to the next United Nations General Assembly and to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The group will examine the problems of security in a nuclear weapons-free world and suggest practical steps towards the goal, including the ways of dealing with stability and security in the transitional period.

Next week, the International Court of Justice will be hearing a case referred to it by the UN General Assembly, asking it to give an advisory judgement on the legality of the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. We believe, and will argue before the Court, that it would be best for the Court not to make a judgement - the legality of nuclear weapons is a different matter, of course, from their utility or strategic value or even their morality.

A judgement by the Court that the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is legal, even if only in some limited circumstances, runs the profound risk of achieving precisely the opposite of what those seeking the Court's opinions want - namely the encouragement of others who want to join the nuclear club.

Even a judgment that nuclear weapons use or threat is illegal - unless very carefully framed to deal with how that conclusion might be put into practical effect - would likely be ignored by the nuclear powers and, as a result, serve no purpose other than to weaken the standing of the Court itself.

The Government has now decided, however, that Australia will also argue to the court that if, despite the good reasons for not making a decision, the court is minded to make a decision in the case, it should decide in favour of the illegality of those weapons. The Foreign Minister, Senator Evans, will travel to The Hague to present this case on the Government's behalf on 30 October.

We are not naive about our role in this enterprise to make the world free of nuclear weapons. We are a nation of only medium size and weight in the world, and we are not a nuclear power.

On the other hand, we are skilled at multilateral diplomacy and have demonstrated on issues like the peace process in Cambodia and APEC and the Chemical Weapons Convention and the protection of Antarctica as a wilderness reserve and the campaign against apartheid, that we have the energy and ideas and the capacity to create coalitions with others, to make a real difference in the world.

With the same energy we gave to those projects we will now commit ourselves to the goal of a nuclear free world.

Reflecting on the history of nuclear strategy, the American writer Fred Kaplan says that nuclear strategies were contrived to disguise the real nature of the nuclear bomb. It is in fact, he writes, "a device of sheer mayhem, a weapon whose cataclysmic powers no-one really had the faintest idea of how to control. The nuclear strategists had come to impose order - but in the end chaos still prevailed."

The world has a chance just now to find a way out of the chaos. The chance will not last long. We can help the world to grasp it, even show the way.

At the beginning of the United Nations' second fifty years, there could be no better way for us to show our commitment to the ideals which motivated the men and women who drew up the Charter than by working, like them, to turn a coalition of noble ideas into a concrete and enduring reality.