

Hiroshima rally 6 august 2022

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Dear Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about the situation in Belgium, one of the NATO countries with US nuclear bombs on its soil.

Belgium is one of the five European countries with US nuclear bombs on its soil. These nuclear gravity bombs were deployed in the early 1960s through a secret agreement between Belgium and the US. Until today, the government maintains a policy of ambiguity, neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear bombs in Belgium, blocking any normal parliamentary debate.

However, it is no secret that about 100 to 150 US B61 nuclear bombs have been deployed in five European countries as part of NATO's nuclear sharing policy. Belgian fighter jets are responsible for employing these nuclear bombs in wartime - as it is the case for Germany, Italy and the Netherlands- which is in breach with the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that prohibits the transfer to or control over nuclear weapons by non-nuclear weapon states. These bombs will soon be replaced by new B61-12 nuclear bombs as part of a \$ 10 billion US modernization program. Because of their precision and low yield options these nuclear weapons are considered 'usable', lowering the threshold for a nuclear war. This all happens without any official statement or public debate.

The resistance against nuclear weapons in Belgium has a long history. Probably many people still remember the large mass mobilizations against the installation of nuclear missiles in various European NATO countries in the early 1980s. In 1983 400,000 demonstrators marched through the streets in Brussels, in what became the biggest demonstration ever in Belgian history. Despite all the protests, the government back then decided to deploy cruise missiles in 1985. However, two years later they were taken back to the US under the INF treaty agreed between the US and the Soviet Union. For an important part, this agreement - that unfortunately ceased to exist after the withdrawal of the US in 2019 – was made possible due to the massive pressure from the peace movement in Europe and the United States.

Numerous subsequent European peace actions kept nuclear disarmament on the agenda. In 2010, foreign ministers of Belgium, Germany, Norway, Luxembourg and the Netherlands wrote a common letter to question NATO nuclear sharing. However, the US and other pro-nuclear-weapon states within the military alliance responded by declaring NATO a 'nuclear alliance' in its new strategic concept. A move that aimed to collectivize nuclear weapons as an integral part of NATO and to silence critics by arguing that anti-nuclear weapons positions go against NATO obligations.

With the entry into force of the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty (TPNW) and the planned replacement of nuclear bombs in Europe by B61-12, new opportunities have arisen for the peace movement. The TPNW is an important milestone in the fight against nuclear weapons, the international peace movement should be credited for. In addition, the anti-nuclear stance of the peace movement is shared by the vast majority of the population.

Various surveys show that the majority of the Belgian population does not want nuclear bombs in Belgium. This is also the case for Germany, Italy and the Netherlands that all host US nuclear arms. The Belgian population's anti-nuclear weapons position was also translated cautiously into the governmental coalition agreement that was approved at the end of last summer noting that "Belgium will play a proactive role in the 2021 NPT Review Conference and, together with European NATO allies, will explore how to strengthen the multilateral non-proliferation framework and how the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons can give new impetus to multilateral nuclear disarmament."

Nevertheless, the Belgian government was reluctant to recognise the ban Treaty as an important tool for nuclear disarmament. Finally, the government gave in to pressure from the peace movement and participated in the MSP as an observer. So did Germany and the Netherlands, two other NATO nuclear sharing countries. This is a first small breach in NATO's position as a nuclear alliance while openly campaigning against the TPNW claiming falsely that it undermines the Non proliferation Treaty.

The pressure from the US and NATO to maintain the nuclear deterrent is huge. The Belgian government is divided over the issue. Greens and Social Democrats want Belgium to remove the nuclear bombs and sign the TPNW, but the Liberals and Christian Democrats want us to remain loyal to NATO's 'nuclear sharing'-policy. But it looks like they don't want to get the government into trouble over nuclear weapons.

The peace movement is campaigning to pressure the government to be serious about nuclear disarmament and to sign the TPNW with much local support. Every year at peace day (21/09), about 130 mayors of cities and municipalities urge the government to remove the nuclear bombs from Belgian territory and to sign the TPNW. Last year we did a 30 km bikes not bombs tour with 150 peace activists to the military base where the nuclear bombs are stored as part of a Europe free nukes campaign. This year, 2 October, our Bikes not Bombs tour will cross Brussels where NATO headquarters is located.

It was the first time in years that the European peace movement campaigned together to show the unified position. The European peace movement needs to join forces internationally and locally to increase its impact as it was the case in the eighties.

Still, even if many recent actions have been taken place on a modest scale, they are a first important step in expanding the anti-nuclear weapons movement in a crucial time as we are witnessing a war in Ukraine, where irresponsible threats to use nuclear weapons have been made. Unfortunately, growing international tensions are accompanied by an increased importance of nuclear weapons in military strategies.

For the coming years, the peace movement faces the challenge of translating the huge anti-nuclear sentiment among the population into major mobilizations and political pressure.