 Give Iran Incentives to Stop Enrichment: Blix

By Lee Berthiaume

Former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix believes countries like Canada must band together to break the complacency that has taken hold over the world on nuclear weapons and their removal. Russia and other countries can be expected to join the exclusive group in their bids to attain a level playing field.

Mr. Blix was in charge of inspections for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003, and has been highly critical of the American and British administration’s efforts. His recent work has focused on trying to revive disarmament and get somewhere and on encouraging and educate the nuclear weapons states to take immediate practical steps that reduce nuclear dangers, and commence negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, Nobuaki Tanaka, delivered the keynote address. “Multilateralism,” he said, “is what is required to consolidate these gains in a coherent global framework that is stable, permanent, and just. It is here that the middle powers have enormously important contributions to make. They enter this process from the moral high ground of those states that chose not to seek weapons of mass destruction—they are practicing what they preach.”

In addition to 23 “middle power” governments, the conference, which was sponsored by the Middle Powers Initiative, attracted diplomats to participate in the technical discussions. The United States, Russia and France were invited, but did not attend.

Some 60 representatives from NGOs attended, as well as officials from the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the support organization for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and members of the International Panel on Fissile Materials, a panel gathering together some of the world’s leading nuclear scientists in order to promote the control of the stocks of weapons-grade nuclear materials.

Mr. Blix said it’s hard to tell other countries not to develop such weapons without leading by example. “It’s like someone sitting with a fat cigar in his mouth and telling the others they should not smoke,” he says. “How could it happen? There’s a domino effect. If North Korea continues testing missiles and weapons, I’m sure it would have an impact on thinking in Japan.”

He adds, “This is what is required to consolidate these gains in a coherent global framework that is stable, permanent, and just. It is here that the middle powers have enormously important contributions to make. They enter this process from the moral high ground of those states that chose not to seek weapons of mass destruction—they are practicing what they preach.”

“Although the Iranians are not worried about Iraq today, they may well be worried about the United States and Europe offering an ending of assurances against attacks from the outside, provided they suspend their enrichment program—or an invitation to join in which they should probe and try in talks.”

Finally, by insisting that the Iranians abandon their enrichment efforts prior to the commencement of negotiations, Mr. Blix says the Western countries have “painted themselves into a corner.”

“Treaty verification is weakening. This is particularly true of the United States, which has over the last six years rejected any verification mechanisms for either existing or planned treaties,” he says. “It is too soon for this to alarm the scientific community and the vast majority of states reject this position.”

Negative security assurances—guarantees by nuclear powers not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states—are a longstanding demand of non-nuclear weapons states parties to the NPT. Their argument is simply that since they have renounced the use of nuclear weapons, the five nuclear states party to the NPT should give their unequivocal legally-binding guarantees that they would not be targets of nuclear weapons.

Unlike the other four issues, which require multilateral cooperation, de-asserting is essentially a bilateral issue between the United States and Russia. The strategic postures of the two largest nuclear states still—15 years after the end of the Cold War—have approximately 3,000 nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert aimed at each other. The goal of middle powers is to encourage the two to remove these weapons from alert to avoid accidents.

All this was sometimes called “Track Two” diplomacy, i.e., quiet sessions out of the headlines. Whatever its results, it is a lot better than future headlines of nuclear catastrophe.

Former Senator Douglas Roche is Chairman of the Middle Powers Initiative and author of Beyond Hiroshima.