

Expediency wins as Norway abandons its humanitarian principles

Richard Lennane

As he opened a meeting on nuclear disarmament verification in Oslo on 16 November, Norway's foreign minister Børge Brende sounded like a man dedicated to pursuing his nation's goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. "We need measures that can bring about real, genuine disarmament," Brende said, highlighting Norway's role. "Nuclear disarmament requires the participation of both nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states."

Brende's apparent enthusiasm for eliminating nuclear weapons seems to fit with Norway's longstanding support for disarmament, as part of a foreign policy underpinned by fundamental humanitarian principles. As Norway's ambassador told the United Nations in October, the international community has a "responsibility to eliminate weapons that cannot be used in accordance with international humanitarian law". Norway is well known internationally as a champion of humanitarian approaches to peace and security, and was a leading player in the development of successful treaties banning antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions.

More recently, Norway began an influential process to examine the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, hosting an international conference in Oslo in 2013 that sparked widespread interest in exploring humanitarian approaches to nuclear disarmament. Successive Norwegian governments have also long recognized the crucial role of a vibrant and independent civil society in pursuing Norway's foreign policy interests.

So it is more than a little strange – and disturbing – that even as Brende is opening verification meetings in Oslo, he is backing away from the humanitarian principles that support his professed goal, and retreating into the kind of shallow political expediency more commonly associated with authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships.

At the October meeting of the United Nations committee dealing with international security and disarmament, other diplomats were taken aback as Norway abruptly abandoned its previous support for humanitarian approaches to nuclear disarmament. Norway abstained on a resolution dealing with the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, when it had previously supported similarly-worded joint statements. More surprisingly, Norway voted against a South African-sponsored resolution on "ethical imperatives for a nuclear-weapon-free world", a declaratory resolution that merely listed the humanitarian and ethical reasons for eliminating nuclear weapons and required no specific action.

Diplomats were further disconcerted by the Norwegian delegation's explanation of its votes. "Unfortunately, the emerging common understanding of a fact-based humanitarian initiative has now been undermined, and the initiative is by many associated with efforts to achieve a legal instrument banning nuclear weapons", Norway's representative said. "Under the current political circumstances, these efforts will not bring us closer to a world free of nuclear weapons." This

extraordinary statement amounts to an admission that Norway is turning away from the humanitarian approach because it does not like where it might lead (awkward discussions within NATO, for example). This is expediency, not principle.

Worse still, the government has since compounded the damage by peremptorily withdrawing funding from a range of civil society organizations working to advance nuclear disarmament on humanitarian grounds, including Norwegian People's Aid, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

Defending Norway's actions to the parliament, Børge Brende said "it is not correct to claim that Norway has changed its position on disarmament this year". But contrast Norway's voting explanation and NGO funding cuts with its statement to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons in December 2014: "We all share the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. Listening to the experts, reaching that goal seems more urgent than ever before ... We welcome initiatives that contribute to meaningful progress towards our common goal of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The humanitarian approach to disarmament and non-proliferation is a contribution to achieving progress".

There is much more at stake here than consistency on nuclear weapons policy. By choosing expediency over humanitarian principles in this instance, because it happens to suit Norway's political and security circumstances, Brende is undermining the entire basis of Norway's humanitarian foreign policy. How can Norway expect to be taken seriously when it engages other nations on humanitarian issues such as the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, when it exempts itself from confronting the

humanitarian implications of its own security arrangements, and moves to crudely suppress civil society criticism?

Brende has defied the wishes of the Norwegian parliament, dismayed a large portion of the international community, and trampled on Norway's noble tradition of apolitical support for civil society. He has cheapened the principles on which Norway's foreign policy is built, and is consequently eroding the respect and influence that Norway enjoys internationally.

Fortunately, there is still time to retrieve the situation. The funding to NGOs working on nuclear disarmament can be restored. The resolutions that Norway failed to support at the UN security and disarmament committee will be taken up by the General Assembly as a whole on 7 December. Norway can take the opportunity to change its vote, and restore its reputation.

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Richard Lennane is the Chief Inflammatory Officer of Wildfire>, an NGO exposing doublethink and hypocrisy in nuclear policies, and promoting a treaty banning nuclear weapons. He is a former United Nations disarmament official and Australian diplomat. Follow him on Twitter: @Wildfire_v