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State Department official: Think about nuclear arms

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Oct. 4, 2010

Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller (CNS photo/courtesy Department of State)

WASHINGTON -- Rose Gottemoeller, assistant secretary of state and lead U.S. negotiator of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, has been spending time on Catholic university campuses lately.

In September, she spoke at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and her alma mater, Georgetown University in Washington, about recently completed negotiations between Russia and the United States to reduce nuclear weapons.

It's important to discuss the topic with students, she said, because so many of them do not see it as "a burning issue," said Gottemoeller, who is Catholic.

"When I was growing up, nuclear weapons were more of a reality," she told Catholic News Service Sept. 30, referring to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the potential nuclear deployment by the Soviet Union that was averted. "Since the Cold War, these issues have faded," she said, but she also was quick to point out that nuclear weapons are hardly relics of the past.

"The fact is, those nuclear weapons didn't go away," she stressed, noting that when START was initially ratified in 1992, the concern was about more than 12,000 stockpiled nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union and the United States. The goal of the new START pact aims to reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals to a maximum of 1,500 deployed weapons.

"This is a big, big reduction, but 1,500 is still lot of weapons," she said.

Oct. 1 marked the 18th anniversary of the U.S. Senate's ratification of the original START pact. That treaty expired last December. Since its expiration, there have not been any U.S. inspectors at Russian nuclear sites or Russian inspectors at U.S. sites. Gottemoeller told CNS the lack of knowledge about each other's arsenals leads to "growing uncertainty" which may cause either country to "make worse case assessments" and in turn build up arsenals.

In April 2009 in Prague, President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev opened negotiations

for a replacement treaty. A year later they signed a new treaty.

The new agreement would not only commit the United States and Russia to cuts in their long-range, ready-to-use weapons but would also extend a 15-year system allowing each country to check the other's nuclear facilities.

It must be ratified by the Senate and the Russian Duma. Once that takes place, from that point, both countries will have seven years to reach the agreement's targets.

In mid-September the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 14-4 in favor of the START pact, but the Senate was likely to postpone a full vote on the treaty until after November's midterm elections.

Although some Republican senators have questions about the treaty, the agreement has the support of current and former administration officials and military leaders. It also is backed by several faith groups including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Gottemoeller noted that the bishops have "continued to see nuclear deterrence as moral issue that must be confronted." She is glad the bishops have taken a "firm stance in support of the treaty" because it gives it weight at the parish level where people can recognize the threat of nuclear war and lend their voice to support the treaty's efforts.

The best thing people can do to voice their support, she said, is to talk to their senators about ratifying the treaty not just as a security measure but as means for the United States to show "moral leadership."

In her Sept. 13 discussion at Georgetown University, sponsored by the university's Center for Peace and Security Studies, Gottemoeller said the momentum toward ratification was moving forward and would be "an opportunity for profound bipartisanship."

The State Department official, who also taught Soviet military policy and Russian security at Georgetown University, warned against letting this process "drag into the new year."

She told students the process had been "a heavy slog" dealing with "a lot of serious issues."

She has been at this type of work for "eons," she jokingly said of her similar work during the past three decades with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Energy Department. When asked what helped her as a negotiator, she credited raising teenagers along with fluent Russian and years of working on nuclear nonproliferation policies.

At Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies Sept. 21, Gottemoeller said the treaty is "ambitious and requires enormous efforts. But it is work in which we must engage."

Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, she said: "In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims."

"We do not have to live in that world," she said. "We do not have to live in a world where there is even one more nuclear-armed country or the possibility of terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons."

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