Japan, August 2011

My colleagues at the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, Ken Coates, who died last year, and Ken Fleet, who is still very active as Secretary of the Foundation, were pleased and honoured to participate in the World Conference against A & H Bombs in the early 1980s. It was a great opportunity to link the unfolding movement for European Nuclear Disarmament with the well-established Japanese campaign to abolish all nuclear weapons. We all benefited greatly from the exchange of information and support which developed.

The Russell Foundation had joined with Edward Thompson, Bruce Kent and other individuals and organisations, in 1980, to launch the Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament. That Appeal gathered extraordinary international support as a massive wave of resistance to the planned installation of so-called “theatre” nuclear weapons such as Pershing and cruise missiles, and Soviet SS20s, spread across Europe. Caspar Weinberger, President Reagan’s Secretary of Defense for six years from 1981, complained of “marbles rolling round a try” as wave after wave of demonstrations against the planned emplacements thronged the capitals of Europe.

To help keep the marbles rolling, the Russell Foundation initiated the annual European Nuclear Disarmament Conventions, the first of which met in Brussels in 1982. These were organised by the END Liaison Committee, which met regularly during the 1980s to

plan subsequent conventions in Berlin, Perugia, Amsterdam, Paris, and so on. One of the participants in the early conventions was the Venerable Sato, who made a powerful impression on the assembled European peace movements.

Thus, during those years there was a strong pull on my colleagues to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki alongside other END activists. I volunteered to go, as well, but didn't get the ticket at that time. Now, in the momentous year of 2011, it has at last been possible to make this journey.

Terrible earthquakes and tsunamis have marked this year. Early in 2011, we at the Russell Foundation were already discussing with Zhores Medvedev whether we might republish his important book, *The Legacy of Chernobyl**, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the explosion in 1986 in the nuclear reactor at that plant in Ukraine which spread nuclear contamination over the surrounding areas and across Europe. This was in the context of the British Government's plans to build a series of new nuclear reactors, mainly on the sites of existing plants. The debate about the inherent dangers of nuclear power generation has become quite muted in Brtitain.

Then disaster struck Japan, on 11 March. We were horrified to see the pictures of the tsunami waves, every bit as menacing as Hokusai's Great Wave off Kanagawa. Cars tried forlornly to race the advancing deluge. Towns were flattened. Boats were beached miles from the retreating sea. Then news about problems at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant started to reach us. Al

Jazeera television provided the most informative coverage in the UK. Indeed, they have maintained their coverage at an impressive standard of objectivity, notwithstanding preoccupations with the "Arab Spring" and NATO's war on Libya.

We saw film of explosions in different parts of the Fukushima plant, and the desperate attempts to cool the reactors by dropping water from helicopters. Then came reports of evacuations, and interviews with displaced residents. Soon, we received news direct from Gensuikyo, which informed us of the deteriorating situation on the ground, and the urgent need for international support and solidarity. These reports and appeals we published in our journal, *The Spokesman*, under the title *What's happening at Fukushima?*

We also consulted Dr Medvedev, who has lived in London since his forced exile from the Soviet Union in the 1970s. He is the author of *Nuclear Disaster in the Urals*, first published in New York in 1979, and translated into Japanese in 1982. This book described the consequences of the Kyshtym disaster, an explosion at a nuclear waste site near Cheliabinsk in the Soviet Union in 1957. Dr Medvedev had investigated the limited available information in writing his book.

This work had caught the attention of some people working in the Japanese nuclear industry. During a lecture tour of Japan in 1987, Dr Medvedev was invited to meet five members of the Japan Atomic Industrial Forum Inc, who wanted to discuss his book, which was then the only published description of the Kyshtym disaster. At that time, Kyshtym was not yet included in the list of

nuclear accidents prepared by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

At the time of his visit to Japan, Dr Medvedev had already started to study the available information on what had happened at Chernobyl in 1986. He was not satisfied with the Soviet Report to the IAEA, which placed most of the blame on power station personnel for gross operational errors. Dr Medvedev found that his Japanese hosts were not interested in too many details. ‘We do not find Chernobyl relevant to Japan,’ one of them told him. ‘Such accidents can never happen here.’

It was not only in Japan that Dr Medvedev encountered denial of his disclosures about nuclear disasters. In November 1976, he had mentioned the explosion of the Kyshtym nuclear waste site in the Urals in the magazine, *New Scientist*. Two days later, the Chairman of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, Sir John Hill, in an interview with the Press Association, published in many countries, described his story as ‘pure fiction, rubbish and [a] figment of imagination’.

American scientists made similar comments. An explosion of nuclear waste was considered impossible. However, in 1977, Dr Medvedev published more details about the ecological effect of this accident, again in *New Scientist*. Then the discussion moved to a different level. In 1978, he was invited to several US National Laboratories including Oak Ridge and Los Alamos. Everywhere he was told that such a serious accident could not happen without American scientists finding out about it.

In Los Alamos in November 1978, Edward Teller, the creator of the American hydrogen bomb, questioned Dr Medvedev very aggressively for nearly three hours. He accused him of a deliberate attempt to frighten western public opinion about the dangers of nuclear power, which was being widely promoted at the time. Subsequently, a report prepared by the Los Alamos National Laboratory, published in 1982 (D. V. Soran, D.V. Stillman *An Analysis of the Alleged Kyshtym Disaster*), attempted to explain the radioactive contamination around Kyshtym as resulting from a nuclear weapon test.

The Kyshtym disaster was partially declassified in 1989. A year later, when the Soviet authorities formally acknowledged this accident, it was finally included in the list of nuclear accidents compiled by the International Atomic Energy Agency, with severity scale 6, between Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

Much of this account is taken from Dr Medvedev's new Foreword to his book, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*. The lesson it teaches is that it is crucial to pursue the truth about so-called nuclear "accidents". A distinguished mining engineer who has worked on health and safety matters in the nuclear industry, Christopher Gifford, has written that

"even natural disasters such as earthquakes have effects which depend on the preparedness or vulnerability of the populations involved".** He continues, "Patterns have been described in man-made disasters. Usually there are many causes which combine to

make the disaster possible. Some of the causes, such as precipitating human error, are predictable. When such errors are anticipated the effects can be minimised. Some causes lie dormant in an organisation and have no adverse effect until combined with other events which make the risk unmanageable. Thus conditions in which some disasters can be avoided have been described. Conditions which make risk management less successful have also been described with the conclusions that some systems are too complex and interactive to be managed successfully."

Mr Gifford's warnings should resonate in the secretive nuclear industry. But it seems that some are determined not to hear properly. In Britain, on 18 May, Dr John Weightman, the chief nuclear inspector, presented his interim report on the events at Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear site in March. Dr Weightman's final report is due in September. As Paul Flynn MP commented in May:

"It is not possible in just eight weeks to make any assessment of the extent of this terrifying event, but that is what the Government have tried to do. This is not about science; this is about spin and PR. The whole reason for putting out the report so prematurely is to shore up collapsing public opinion and investor opinion."

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For, once again, there is a strong international push to promote nuclear energy. In Britain, for several years now, there has been a drive to build new reactors, notwithstanding that no tried and tested designs, approved by the nuclear inspectorate, exist. As Mr Gifford wrote in late 2010***,

'It has become clearer in the last year that the promise of proven, safe, efficient, economical "generation III" nuclear reactors cannot be fulfilled, simply because they do not exist. It appears that, if

they are permitted and developed, highly active spent fuel waste will have to be guarded in surface stores for more than 100 years … ’

What to do with the waste? For many years in Britain, going back to the 1950s, it was officially denied that there was any connection between the civil nuclear power programme and the military use of plutonium, derived from spent reactor fuel, to produce atomic bombs.**** It wasn’t until the late 1970s that such a contention was refuted by one brave insider as ‘bloody lies’. Today, it is widely acknowledged that civil nuclear reactors produce plutonium which can be processed into nuclear weapons.

That long-running deception has its parallel in military nuclear programmes. How many military nuclear installations are there? Where are they? What accidents have occurred? What contamination has resulted? Have accidents on submarines contaminated the marine environment? What about the residual effects of nuclear testing?

Nuclear weapons programmes, notwithstanding their own inherent threat, constitute a continuing source of pressure for civilian use of nuclear power. It is reasonable to contend, as Professor Roberts, formerly of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, has done*****, that effective nuclear disarmament will not be achieved while nuclear reactors exist.

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* *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, Zhores Medvedev, 2011, Spokesman (ISBN 9780851248035)

** *Deregulation, Disasters and BSE*, Christopher Gifford, published in September 1996 by Spokesman for European Labour Forum (ISBN 0851246001)

*** *Nuclear New Build? A review of the issues*, Christopher Gifford, published in December 2010 by Spokesman for Socialist Renewal (ISBN 9780851247878)

**** *Nuclear Reactors: Do we need more?,* Christopher Gifford, published in June 2006 by Spokesman for Socialist Renewal (ISBN 0851247261)

***** *Sixty Years of Nuclear History: Britain's Hidden Agenda*, Fred Roberts, John Carpenter Publishing, 1999