

guardian.co.uk

Mohamed ElBaradei warns of new nuclear age

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guardian.co.uk, Thursday 14 May 2009 23.40 BST

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The number of potential nuclear weapons states could more than double in a few years unless the major powers take radical steps towards disarmament, the head of the UN's nuclear watchdog has warned.

In a Guardian interview, Mohamed ElBaradei said the threat of proliferation was particularly grave in the Middle East, a region he described as a "ticking bomb".

ElBaradei, the outgoing director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said the current international regime limiting the spread of nuclear weapons was in danger of falling apart under its own inequity. "Any regime ... has to have a sense of fairness and equity and it is not there," he said in an interview at his offices in Vienna.

He has presided over the IAEA for more than 11 years and is due to retire in November at the age of 67. A bitter diplomatic battle is under way over his successor.

The IAEA director general is the custodian of a global arms control regime that is increasingly beleaguered. It was built around the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and the goal of restricting membership of the nuclear club to five postwar powers. It has been under strain in the last four decades, with Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea developing weapons outside the NPT. But now ElBaradei says the system is in danger of collapse, with an abrupt spread in nuclear weapons technology.

"We still live in a world where if you have nuclear weapons, you are buying power, you are buying insurance against attack. That is not lost on those who do not have nuclear weapons, particularly in [conflict] regions."

He predicted that the next wave of proliferation would involve "virtual nuclear weapons states", who can produce plutonium or highly enriched uranium and possess the knowhow to make warheads, but who stop just short of assembling a weapon. They would therefore remain technically compliant with the NPT while being within a couple of months of deploying and using a nuclear weapon.

"This is the phenomenon we see now and what people worry about in Iran. And this phenomenon goes much beyond Iran. Pretty soon ... you will have nine weapons states and probably another 10 or 20 virtual weapons states." ElBaradei pointed to the spread of uranium enrichment technology around the world, but he was most concerned about the Middle East.

"When you see a lot of concern about the Middle East, it's a result of people feeling

totally repressed by their own government and feeling unjustly treated by the outside world. This combination makes it a ticking bomb."

ElBaradei described the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a terrorist group as the greatest threat facing the world, and pointed to the rise of the Taliban in Pakistan: "We are worried because there is a war in a country with nuclear weapons. We are worried because we still have 200 cases of illicit trafficking of nuclear material a year reported to us."

He argued that the only way back from the nuclear abyss was for the established nuclear powers to fulfil their NPT obligations and disarm as rapidly as possible. He said it was essential to generate momentum in that direction before the NPT comes up for review next April in New York. "There's a lot of work to be done but there are a lot of things we can do right away," ElBaradei said. "Slash the 27,000 warheads we have, 95% of which are in Russia and the US. You can easily slash [the arsenals] to 1,000 each, or even 500."

Only deep strategic cuts, coupled with internationally agreed bans on nuclear tests and on the production of weapons-grade fissile material, could restore the world's faith in arms control, he argued.

"If some of this concrete action is taken before the NPT [conference], you would have a completely different environment. All these so-called virtual weapons states, or virtual wannabe weapons states, will think twice ... because then the major powers will have the moral authority to go after them and say: 'We are doing our part of the bargain. Now it is up to you.'"

ElBaradei won global fame – and the Nobel peace prize for himself and his agency – by standing up to the Bush and Blair governments over claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. His relationships with the Obama administration, and to some extent the Brown government, are better, since both have embraced banning nuclear weapons. Obama has started talks with Moscow on mutual cuts in arsenals.

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