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ElBaradei, IAEA share Nobel Peace Prize

Disarmament community 'ecstatic' diplomat, nuclear watchdog honoured

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WITH A REPORT FROM ESTANISLAO OZIEWICZ

WASHINGTON -- Mohamed ElBaradei, the urbane international diplomat who quietly battled the Bush administration over the best way to bottle up the nuclear-weapons genie, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize yesterday, an honour widely seen as a repudiation of Washington's willingness to wage war on rogue states seeking weapons of mass destruction.

Six decades after the United States obliterated two Japanese cities with the world's first atomic bombs, the peace prize committee bluntly cited lack of progress in banning the apocalyptic weapons as justification for awarding this year's prize to Mr. ElBaradei and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations watchdog he leads.

"That the world has achieved little in this respect makes active opposition to nuclear arms all the more important today," the committee said.

Naming Mr. ElBaradei, 63, as this year's Nobel Peace Prize recipient delighted many in the disarmament community, especially those who regard the Bush administration with deep suspicions.

"It's very pleasing," said Adele Buckley, chair of the Canadian Pugwash group.

"Essentially, the United States has abandoned support" for the multilateral approach, she said yesterday.

Ms. Buckley said she hoped the prize might shine the spotlight of international attention on the growing dangers of proliferation and the tireless efforts of Mr. ElBaradei, whom she lauded as "not the 'Yes' man that the United States wanted."

The Pugwash Conferences, named for the Nova Scotia town where it first convened, won the peace prize a decade ago.

Mark Gwozdecky, a Canadian who worked with Mr. ElBaradei for nearly four years as his chief spokesman, said yesterday from his Ottawa home that he and his former colleagues at the IAEA are "absolutely ecstatic" about the Nobel honour.

Mr. Gwozdecky left the IAEA a few months ago to return to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa as director of the nuclear non-proliferation division.

He said that the award is a wonderful vindication for agency inspectors.

"What they did in Iraq really made me proud, when some were trying to diminish the value of inspectors, cast them as bumbling and said [former president] Saddam [Hussein] was three steps ahead of them, and they couldn't do anything."

Yesterday, an exultant Mr. ElBaradei, who said he only learned of the honour while watching television with his wife, called it a "shot in the arm" for the efforts of his beleaguered agency.

"Verification and diplomacy, used together, can work," he has argued time and again.

In February of 2003, a month before U.S. President George W. Bush attacked Mr. Hussein's regime in Iraq, because it was said to have banned arsenals of poison gas and germ warfare and was seeking nuclear weapons, Mr. ElBaradei warned: "We have to date found no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities in Iraq."

That didn't stop Mr. Bush from sending in the tanks and the bombers.

"It was the saddest day in my life," Mr. ElBaradei said later, long after exhaustive postwar inspections had proved his assessment correct -- that Baghdad was harbouring no secret nuclear-weapons program.

Yesterday, the Bush administration offered grudging congratulations in a terse statement, but could not bring itself to applaud the decision to name both Mr. ElBaradei and the IAEA.

Meanwhile, in New York, John Bolton, the U.S. ambassador to the UN and one of Mr. ElBaradei's leading detractors, declined comment on the peace prize award.

Mr. ElBaradei said he did not view the prize as a slap at the Bush administration.

"We had a disagreement before the Iraq war -- honest disagreement. We could have been wrong; they could have been right."

Greenpeace denounced the choice of Mr. ElBaradei because it believes that the IAEA has, in fact, increased the risk of nuclear-weapons proliferation.

"Through the IAEA's worldwide support of nuclear power, 35 to 40 countries today have the capability of building atomic weapons within several months, as Mr. ElBaradei himself has recently admitted," Greenpeace said in a statement.

The IAEA has no coercive powers; it cannot discipline those countries that don't accede to its treaties. But even the award committee seemed more intent on focusing on the need for progress.

"At a time when disarmament efforts appear deadlocked, when there is a danger that nuclear arms will spread both to states and to terrorist groups, and when nuclear power again appears to be playing an increasingly significant role, IAEA's work is of incalculable importance," it said.

The prize will be formally awarded at a ceremony in Oslo on Dec. 10, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death in 1896. Winners of the peace prize are given about \$1.5-million. Mr. ElBaradei and the IAEA will share the money equally, the committee said.

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