

# Message in a Medal



**Professor Ole Danbolt Mjøs is Chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee and Professor of Medicine at the University of Tromsø. He headed the five-member Norwegian committee that deliberated over the choice of 2005's Nobel Peace Prize winner. Professor Mjøs spoke with the IAEA Bulletin to give us a rare glimpse into the decision making process that goes on behind closed doors.**

**Q:** Selecting the winner for the Nobel Peace Prize seems like a daunting task. Every year you receive many nominations. Can you describe your selection process?

**A:** The process starts in February, once all the nominations have been received. Nominations can come in from governments, university chancellors, leaders of peace research institutes, members of the Nobel Committee and even former Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. The five-member committee, appointed by the Norwegian Parliament, meets monthly to review the candidates and gradually the list of names narrows. Over the years the list of nominees has been growing and this year we received 199 nominations.

The method we use for selecting is not easy to describe. We come to our meetings with an open mind, are aware of the world's situation and are mindful of Alfred Nobel's will where the criteria for winning the peace prize is spelled out: *"to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses."*

**Q:** Dr. ElBaradei found out that he won the Nobel Peace Prize by watching the live announcement on CNN—is that usual?

**A:** The tradition is that Geir Lundestad, the Director of the Nobel Institute, places a phone call to the winner half an hour before I announce it—which is usually in mid-October and on a Friday. Of course it's not always possible to get a hold of the recipient. But this year the Norwegian Broadcasting System was quick to speculate and one particular journalist always seems to find out the winner and leak it before we've had a chance to do so

formally. Bearing in mind previous 'scoops', we decided that we wouldn't call the IAEA because as it's such a large organization it would likely be leaked.

**Q:** Why is the Nobel Peace Prize considered to be so prestigious?

**A:** One factor is that the Peace Prize belongs to a family of prizes that are awarded every year in literature, chemistry, physics, economics and medicine. And, while the Peace Prize gets the most publicity, nevertheless it is a family of prestigious prizes. So that helps in the reputation of the Peace Prize.

In addition, if you look at our record of awarding the Peace Prize over the past 100 years, our selections have not been perfect, but reasonable. If you look at the list of past recipients, you might think of some who should have been awarded it — but for the most part they are reasonably good choices. I will mention one great omission and that is Mahatma Gandhi. He was short-listed five times but because of controversy in the committee around 1947, he was never awarded the prize.

**Q:** Geir Lundestad, the Director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, has said that with the awarding of the Peace Prize, the Committee was trying to give Dr. ElBaradei a 'shot in the arm'—and to motivate the IAEA to keep doing what it's doing. Do you share his view?

**A:** Who could replace IAEA today on these matters? There is no one else, because each nation on its own cannot do this. Society has given the IAEA a mandate to work in cooperation with different nations. It can be an organization that has a leader that is only following strict

rules. Or as in the case of the IAEA, with a leader who has a vision, who has a mission, who has courage to do it—in collaboration with 2300 people who work at the IAEA. You are awarded this together. There is nobody else.

At a time of increasing threat from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the IAEA is the only international organization tasked to halt their spread. The Nobel Committee hoped the award would inspire the Agency in its work.

Yes, there's been some criticism as to what you have achieved—there have been pluses and minuses—but the steady work that has been done by the IAEA since its establishment has had its successes. And, in addition, it is critically important for the future for a peaceful world. The committee recognises that this is a difficult job and we hope the prize is a 'shot in the arm'—an inspiration for further work.

**Q: How can the IAEA leverage this award ?**

**A:** You have to keep the pressure on the fight against atomic weapons and on the reduction of atomic weapons in those countries that already have them. While the main mandate for the IAEA is, as I understand it, to inhibit nuclear weapons proliferation to other nations, in our decision we thought both in terms of reduction and non-proliferation.

**Q: What are the criteria for measuring peace?**

**A:** I think we first can look at the underpinnings of peace. There are many regions in the world where you would think there would be war because the cultural sensitivities in that area could potentially cause conflict. The media focuses all the time on war zones, but luckily today there are more areas in the world at peace than at war. It is interesting to consider why there is peace in some areas where one would think there would be war.

For example, I live in northern Norway in the university town of Tromsø. Northern Norway partly borders Sweden and partly Finland but we have a common border with Russia. This border is one where the differences between the two sides—socially, economically—is one of the greatest I have ever seen. But there has not been a war with Russia even during the Cold War. Conflicts have been managed, and that is great to see. We have established a Peace Centre at our University (I am the Chairman) to look at these underpinnings of peace.

But what would be a success for peaceful development and what are the criteria for peaceful development? The

ultimate goal is to eliminate nuclear weapons, if we can have that as a hope.

**Q: Which previous Nobel Peace Prize winner speaks most to you?**

**A:** That's not an easy question—there are so many. If I should mention only one then it would be Nelson Mandela—for personal reasons. I work at Tromsø University which is the northernmost university in the world and the smallest in Norway. In June 2005 we hosted a big concert to highlight the fight against AIDS. Nelson Mandela was invited but no one thought that he'd go up there with his ailing health. But he did. He said he wanted to come to the top of the world to say thank you to Scandinavia for what the region had done to fight against apartheid and to send a message to the world to fight AIDS. Because this is the land of the midnight sun, the sun was shining well past midnight as he spoke before the crowd saying, 'You are all Africans.'

**Q: What message do you hope to convey by this year's awarding of the Peace Prize to Dr. ElBaradei and the IAEA?**

**A:** We come back time and again to the importance of working against the spread of nuclear weapons. In 1975 the peace prize was awarded to Andrei Sakharov. In 1985, it was the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and in 1995 the award went to Joseph Rotblat and the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. The decade intervals are purely coincidental. But what is worth noting is that this year also marks 60 years since the UN was established, and it is also 60 years since Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August 1945. All of this speaks to 'never more.'

It is very important to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. We haven't really achieved much through these decades but we shouldn't give up. We hope to reinvigorate the work in nuclear non-proliferation.

It is a challenge to every nation, to all powerful persons, every man and woman, to the whole world, that we must fight nuclear weapons. We must reduce and eliminate them. It is a challenge, with great expectations for everybody to work along the lines of Dr. ElBaradei and the IAEA.

*—Interview conducted by Kirstie Hansen in Oslo for the IAEA Bulletin.*