

ZAPORIZHZHYA
PROTECTION
PROJECT



WORLD**BEYOND**WAR.org



UNITING
NATIONS

Episode Guest: **JOHN REUWER**

Zaporizhzhya Protection Project

Stephanie: This is Uniting Nations. In this episode, [Anna Ikeda](#) and I speak with [John Reuwer](#) from [World BEYOND War](#). John has an audacious plan to use Unarmed Civilian Protection in concert with the UN in order to help prevent nuclear disaster in Ukraine, which would have an impact across the world.

John: I'm [John Reuwer](#). I'm a retired emergency physician with a long-time interest in helping people find ways to resolve conflicts and keep themselves safe without harming others. So, I've studied nonviolent actions, as a way to do that, over many decades. And I currently serve on the board of directors of [World BEYOND War](#) and I'm currently chair of a nonviolent effort at mitigating some of the harm in Ukraine called the "[Zaporizhzhya Protection Project](#)."

What is this Zaporizhzhya Protection Project about?

The Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant, the largest in Europe and one of the largest in the world, is sitting on the front lines of a war in Ukraine from the Russian invasion. And if that plant is disturbed, it contains 37 years of nuclear waste sitting in relatively unprotected pools, that if disturbed could cause another Chernobyl, creating a huge area of contamination across Europe and a zone of unlivability similar to Chernobyl, for tens of thousands of people.

And we're trying to support the [United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency](#) in a call for a nuclear safety zone around that plant to essentially remove it from the war effort, to protect it while the conflict is settled in other ways.

And what has the International Atomic Energy Agency been doing in terms of establishing this nuclear safety and security protection zone?

In a piece of rather masterful diplomacy, the Director General Rafael Grossi, of the Atomic Energy Agency, has done some diplomacy between Ukraine, Moscow, Rome, Vienna, trying to get all sides to agree to create a safety zone around this plant so that these tremendous risks from radioactive release will not be added to all the other misery this war is causing.

And the diplomacy work he's done to accomplish that is impressive because he has managed to maintain the position that it's Ukraine's nuclear power plant, despite Russia's claim to it, and has allowed his inspectors to go through Ukraine – something very difficult for the Russians to do, but they've agreed to that, attesting to his great diplomatic skills. And Russia and Ukraine's knowledge that that plant needs to be kept safe for everybody's sake.

And not only for the sake of Ukrainians and those around Ukraine, but for the whole world

Well, we know from the Fukushima and Chernobyl disasters, the nuclear power plants, that they can create worldwide contamination. Radionuclides were detected all over the world after both of those disasters. And the Zaporizhzhya plant has at least as much or – far more radionuclide material sitting there than Chernobyl did, and at least as much as Fukushima.

And so, everybody in the world is affected in some way by this. When I went to Romania and Ukraine in September and October, I was looking to find people who wanted to resist the Russian

invasion without participating in war. Because we at World BEYOND War think that war is more of an enemy to the human race than any other enemy is to each other – one group of humans to another.

And so, we went looking for people that were willing to do nonviolent actions to maintain their freedom and safety rather than contributing to war. And it was a bit discouraging as we flooded the area with tens of billions of dollars worth of weapons, which seemed effective in protecting Kyiv. But now this has grown into a war that doesn't seem to have any end.

So, while I was there, I read about the director general's proposal to create a safety zone around this plant. And I looked at what they were doing and suddenly, there were 14 UN inspectors behind Russian lines in occupied territories in the middle of a war zone. And I'm' thinking, "This is unarmed protection."

These are radiological technicians maintaining the safety of this plant, probably never heard of nonviolent action or civilian protection, and yet they're doing it. The least we can do, those of us who have been trying to study this and practice it around the world for the last 40 years, is to give them all the assistance that we can.

And then I realized, well, we don't really have a team of people ready to do that. So, we created this project to recruit people to train and form a team that could be offered in assistance in whatever way the United Nations, or say the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#), could possibly use us to help maintain the security around that plant.

Who would these people be that would participate in this team, and how would they be trained?

We recruited people from all over the world, really, about 30 people who have done all of our training so far.

The trainings, so far, have all been online, but they are geared toward giving us a skill-set that would be useful if we were deployed on the ground, and supported the UN mission there. And that would include knowledge of all things nuclear, the dangers of the plant, what to do in case of a leak and so forth. A discipline, strategic understanding of unarmed protection methodology that's been so well written up now and used effectively around the world.

Certainly, a background in Ukrainian history, the conflict analysis of what the whole Russian/Ukrainian conflict is. Practicing in teams, working as affinity groups, emergence decision-making and that sort of thing. Some basic language skills and familiarity with digital translators, although we'd be dependent on human translators for sure. And a host of other things.

How do you see the UN becoming more involved with what you've started?

Well, the UN is involved. We're taking inspiration from these brave inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency. We are building a skill-set that could aid them in any way they see fit. And neither they nor we can be in that area without permission of really both the Russian and the Ukrainian governments. And they managed to do that for a small number of inspectors. They

have not managed to negotiate for the safety zone around the plant. They're still working very hard at that, but we've been in touch with them.

And while we're small compared to the resources of the UN, they have invited us to stay in touch with them because the situation on the ground is changing constantly. And neither they nor we ever know how we might fit in to do that.

So, the important thing for us to be trained and ready should an opportunity arise to assist them in any way.

One way we can imagine doing that is, most of their work is done at a very high level, so they're talking to the highest levels of the involved governments as well as the military chains of command and so forth.

We imagine ourselves, being a civil society organization, perhaps being on the ground helping plant workers and their families in the involved cities and localities of both sides of the Dnipro River, which is the front line of the war, stay in touch with each other so that trust can be built. That rumors that the other side is cheating or doing something can be quashed, if needed, and try to maintain peace on the ground while the negotiations are going on to keep this plant safe at a higher level.

Thank you so much, John, for such an important work you're doing and also sharing what you're doing with us. So, it sounds like you have been in touch with the IAEA and the UN and how it's been received. What kind of response are you getting from them?

Well, we get many thanks for what we're doing and for our concern. I don't think we've yet been seen as a major player or contributor. They have not said, "Oh, this is great, what you're doing. Come work with us. Come meet with us." They have listened to us about what we have to offer, and basically realize that we're pretty small in numbers and, certainly, in resources compared to what the United Nations already has.

For example, the International Atomic Energy Agency – and I wasn't aware of this – has not just hundreds, but thousands of inspectors around the world, including some that have worked in conflict zones in other countries that have been at war without directly affecting the plant the way this one has. But they have already done a lot of the kind of work that we expect to do.

What we uniquely have to offer is a willingness to be places, perhaps, where others might not quite be ready to go, and to work locally on the ground with people more like ourselves on both sides of the conflict, to add to what they're doing.

One way to look at that question in a bigger way is, look at what the world is willing to spend on violent approaches to conflict, right? The [Institute for Economics and Peace](#), for example, says that the cost of preparations for violence and dealing with violence around the world is somewhere between \$6 and \$13 trillion a year.

And you look at what the biggest nonviolent organizations are spending on protecting people – and there are only two large, well-paid organizations. One is [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#), and the other is [Cure Violence Global](#). And they each of budgets in the – between \$30 and \$60 million a year.

So, it's miniscule, to be almost immeasurable, compared to what the world spends on violence. And the hope of a mission like ours is to show a few more people that there are places and times – in fact, we believe most times – almost all times, when nonviolence is a superior way to resolve a conflict or to stay safe.

And that the good that violence seems to do is only there because that's where all the money is. And nonviolence is not unknown because it doesn't work, but because it's not been tried with enough resources to really tell how well it works. Does that make sense?

Anna: I totally agree. It's just, they're not used to this kind of work. You mentioned how most of the work has been, perhaps, diplomatic and high-level. And then on the other side is the use of force, but to be able to really implement this nonviolent way of protecting the power plant. There's really a lack of evidence or lack of imagination to see how this kind of work can succeed.

So, I think what you are doing is incredibly important. And I wonder, now that the war has been going on for almost a year, what do you want people to really know about the overall situation in Ukraine, and especially your efforts? And how can people support you?

John: Well, I think the main thing to be known is it's not a static situation that's just going to go on endlessly. It's very unlikely that this will just be a war that a few people care about. It can go on and kill hundreds of thousands and millions of people, like the wars in Afghanistan, even Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia, that doesn't make the news despite unbelievable human misery and suffering.

This one is much more volatile because it's the first time, really, two nuclear powers are going at each other more and more directly every month as the weapons escalation increases.

And the risk of disaster at this nuclear power plant by accident or intentionally, or worse, the use, of course, of nuclear weapons, which is a threat every single day. And people's ability to pretend that's not really a risk just boggles my mind.

This war could really, really do us in. We've got to realize that Putin or Biden are perfectly capable, in any given day, of making many cities in each other's countries look like what this war has done to Mariupol, or currently at Bakhmut. And just pretending that'll never happen anywhere else just seems like naivety that causes me pain. This is a very dangerous situation.

And so, anybody that wants to contribute to alternatives, of course, I think the most important thing to do is to call all our governments to negotiate and end this war, and a just peace for both sides. And if they want to take a step further, by all means, join our volunteer activity here. And at some point, we may well get an invitation to get into Ukraine or some neighboring country and really make a difference on the ground.

If I had to ask listeners to consider anything, it is when you see people in the world pushing for war or more spending on military affairs and willing to just ignore the cost of this war. I mean, the US now says they're pretty convinced that 200,000 Russian soldiers have been killed, and at least 100 and probably many more Ukrainian soldiers, and 50,000 civilians dead. You count those.

What could Ukraine – what could we be doing with nonviolence that might be risky, that might involve people getting hurt? But what could you imagine would ever do that damage? Not to

mention the infrastructure, the loss of all the business, the facilities, the contaminated water, the lack of electricity, a nuclear power plant is at risk. What could nonviolence ever do that would be worse than that, and why wouldn't we want to put resources into an alternative?

So, leveling the playing field is what I ask people to do. If you think violence is necessary, this is a just war, just look at the cost in human lives, in money, and opportunities lost, and environmental damage, and the moral damage. Even if the Ukrainians were to win this war outright, or the Russians were to win it outright, which is almost impossible, if you really look at the geopolitics.

But even if one – it would only sow so much hate and resentment on the other side. And look at what NATO is doing in response. Everyone is increasing their military spending. Former neutral nations now want to take sides and remilitarize. There's not any good end to that. You only sow the seeds of the next war, which would make it much, much worse.

We've got to find the alternative.