

Time to ban nuclear weapons testing forever

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The story of Kazakhstan's independence is intricately linked to the banning of nuclear testing and the renunciation of nuclear weapons. On 29 August 1991, Kazakhstan became the first country in the world to close a nuclear test site on its territory. The decision by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to close the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site where the Soviet Union carried out more than 450 nuclear weapon tests was welcomed by the people of Kazakhstan, and helped lead to the country's declaration of independence on 16 December 1991.

It is no surprise that the Kazakh people were so strongly supportive of the decision to shut the Semipalatinsk site. The tests, which took place between 1949 and 1989, had the combined explosive power of 2,500 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima. The fall-out from these tests – of which over 100 were above ground – affected 1.5 million people and led to radioactive pollution to various degrees of an area roughly the size of today's Germany.

It has left a terrible legacy. A generation later, deaths, deformities and cancer from radiation remain all too common in this region. My home town Karkaralinsk, some 400 kilometres west of the test site, has not been spared. For us and many other communities, the threat from nuclear weapons is not abstract but all too real.

OUR CLEAR CHOICE

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Kazakhstan inherited the fourth-largest nuclear arsenal in the world: more than 100 ballistic missiles and more than 1,000 nuclear warheads, capable of reaching any point on Earth. What is less well known is that we also found ourselves, if it had been our wish, with the infrastructure and expertise to maintain and deploy this arsenal.

This was not the choice that Kazakhstan made. Instead, my country opted for full nuclear disarmament and active participation in all non-proliferation treaties and regimes. This decision may seem surprising, given Kazakhstan's unique geopolitical position between two major nuclear powers. But those familiar with my young country, its people and leadership understand that Kazakhstan believed the retention of nuclear weapons

would damage, rather than bring, security and prestige.

Since its independence, Kazakhstan has been vigorously promoting the principles and ideals of nuclear disarmament and working tirelessly to rid the world of the nuclear threat. We are a founding member of the 2009 Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia, which outlaws nuclear weapons and their testing in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Through our recently signed agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency to host its Low Enriched Uranium Bank, we will establish a guaranteed stock of nuclear fuel to ensure that there is no disruption to countries' supplies and to help them develop civilian nuclear power while meeting all non-proliferation requirements.



Kazakhstan has also played an active role in the Nuclear Security Summits in Washington, D.C. (2010), Seoul (2012) and The Hague (2014), which aim to strengthen the international framework to prevent nuclear materials from falling into the hands of terrorists.

A KEY DATE: 29 AUGUST

Our clear immediate priority in the field of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, however, is the nuclear test ban. In 2009, at the initiative of Kazakhstan, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 29 August as the International Day against Nuclear Tests. The date has a deep symbolic significance as it is not only the day on which the Semipalatinsk site was closed but it also marks the anniversary of the Soviet Union's first nuclear weapons test in 1949.

Since its first commemoration in 2010, the International Day against Nuclear Tests has helped raise public awareness about the terrible consequences of nuclear testing and the need to ban them once and for all through the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). It is also an annual reminder of the importance of maintaining international efforts to continue nuclear disarmament. The ultimate goal must be to rid the world of its Cold War legacy of nuclear weapons and the outdated psychology of nuclear deterrence that underpins their continuing existence. This is a goal that has no doubt become even more critical in view of the current trends in international relations.

At this year's events to mark the International Day against Nuclear Tests in Astana, Kazakhstan, we took stock of the 24 years that have passed since the closure of the Semipalatinsk test site. We noted with great satisfaction that the intervening years have proved that we made the right decision. As we hoped, Kazakhstan continues to enjoy peaceful relations with all of its neighbours. Instead of squandering our resources on

» Those who know my country and its people understand that Kazakhstan sees neither security nor prestige in nuclear weapons.«

maintaining and/or developing weapons of mass destruction, we have been able to invest in roads, hospitals and universities.

The closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site was followed by the shutting down of other major test sites in Nevada (USA), Novaya Zemlya (Russia) and elsewhere. These closures together paved the way for the negotiation of the CTBT in the mid-1990s.

SHARED DETERMINATION

This year's International Day against Nuclear Tests was particularly poignant because August also saw the 70th commemoration of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our two countries' experiences explain why Japan and Kazakhstan share the same determination to strive for a nuclear-weapon-free world. This is why it is also natural that our nations will jointly chair this year's CTBT Article XIV Conference, the biennial mechanism for facilitating the Treaty's entry into force. Together with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, who himself is from Hiroshima, we will spare no effort to spearhead international efforts to advance the CTBT's entry into force during our two-year chairmanship.

In addition to President Nazarbayev's efforts to end nuclear testing by engaging at the highest political level with the eight countries that have yet to sign and/or ratify the CTBT, in 2012 the President launched a global education and online petition campaign, the ATOM Project which stands for "Abolish Testing: Our Mission." So far, more than 200,000 people from around the world have added their names

to calls on world leaders to formally and permanently renounce nuclear testing.

READY FOR VERIFICATION

The ban on nuclear tests is underpinned by an impressive verification system, which is already largely operational even before the Treaty has entered into force. Kazakhstan contributes to this system through five monitoring stations. Data are transmitted directly to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) in Vienna and to the Kazakhstan National Data Centre, which also uses the information for the purposes of disaster warning and scientific research.

In addition to a series of CTBTO field tests and training events, Kazakhstan hosted the organization's first full-scale on-site inspection simulation, the Integrated Field Exercise (IFE08), at the former Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in 2008. Building on this experience, the CTBTO carried out its second Integrated Field Exercise in Jordan in 2014. This simulation, in which experts from Kazakhstan participated, demonstrated convincingly that the CTBTO has now mastered all components of the Treaty's verification regime.

The CTBTO has clearly delivered. Now the ball is in the court of the eight remaining countries. We hope that Kazakhstan's history and example will inspire these nations not only to embrace the CTBT, but also to turn their backs on these terrible weapons and make our world and future safer.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ERLAN IDRISOV

was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan in 2012, a position he also held from 1999 to 2002. Idrissov began his diplomatic career in 1985. Previously he served as First Secretary of the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the UN, Head of the Americas Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador-at-large, Adviser to the President of Kazakhstan, and First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Idrissov was also Ambassador to the UK, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, and the United States.