

INTERVIEW

Michel Nambobona

In pursuit of peace and security:
One man's role in securing his country's ratification of the CTBT

»When I realized the great danger posed by nuclear weapons, I became aware of the importance of ratifying the CTBT.«

When the Central African Republic ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) on 26 May 2010, the number of ratifications by African States increased to 38. A total of 51 of the 53 countries in Africa have already signed the CTBT. You played a key role in ensuring that the ratification process was completed. Exactly what did this entail?

My personal role in securing ratification of the CTBT by the relevant authorities in the Central African Republic (CAR) began on 6 June 2003. At that time, I was working at the Geophysical Observatory in Bangui as an engineering geologist. Over the next few years, I

sent a series of letters to the heads of ministerial departments explaining the importance of ratifying the CTBT. I also highlighted the activities being carried out by the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). However, despite all my efforts, I was unable to solicit the support that I required.

In February 2009, I was appointed Director of Electricity and Hydrocarbons at the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics. My experience in the field of nuclear monitoring and verification activities related to the CTBTO also enabled me

to serve as Deputy Coordinator of the National Radiation Protection Agency (ANR). I was responsible for processing documents related to electricity, hydrocarbons and the safety and security of radioactive materials. In fulfilling these functions, I became acquainted with people who enabled me to pursue the CTBT issue. From May 2009, I started raising awareness and interest within the Ministry of Mines about the importance of the CTBTO and of ratifying the Treaty.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity in June 2009 to explain the important role of the CTBT's International Monitoring System (IMS) to Lieutenant-Colonel Sylvain Ndoutingäi, the State Minister of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics, when I was assigned to advise him about the International Centre of Seismic Safety.

Two IMS stations, which are part of a 337-facility global network, are

to be hosted by my country: a primary seismic station¹ PS11, which has already been established, and a new infrasound station IS12, which will be constructed in Bangui. Convinced of the importance of seismic monitoring, the non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons, and safeguarding international security and peace, the State Minister ordered that a document be issued to the Council of Ministers.

This document, which explained the CTBTO's activities and benefits for the States hosting IMS stations, such as technical support and the creation of National Data Centres where necessary, was adopted without amendment by the Council of Ministers in November 2009. After that, an Explanatory Memorandum on the bill and the instrument of ratification of the CTBT were presented and defended by the State Minister to the National Assembly. They both received the full approval of the government led by President François Bozize and Prime Minister Faustin Archange Touadera. On 13 April 2010, the National Assembly endorsed the Explanatory Memorandum on the bill and the instrument of ratification of the CTBT. Finally, on 23 April 2010, President Bozize enacted the law and the instrument of ratification. I personally brought the documentation with a Note Verbale from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when I travelled to Vienna to participate in a Technical Training Programme organized by the CTBTO from 17 to 28 May 2010. All of these documents were then sent by CTBTO staff to the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who is also the Depository of the Treaty.

Ratification was a victory for the Central African Republic and for all those involved both directly and indirectly in the ratification process. On 26 May 2010 when the instrument of ratification was deposited in New York, the UN Secretary-General declared the CAR as the 153rd State to ratify the CTBT and acknowledged that my country is fully engaged in the struggle for international security and peace.

As a continent, Africa continues to face a number of development challenges such as poverty, disease, and political conflicts. In view of these pressing issues, how did you become aware of the importance of ratifying the CTBT?

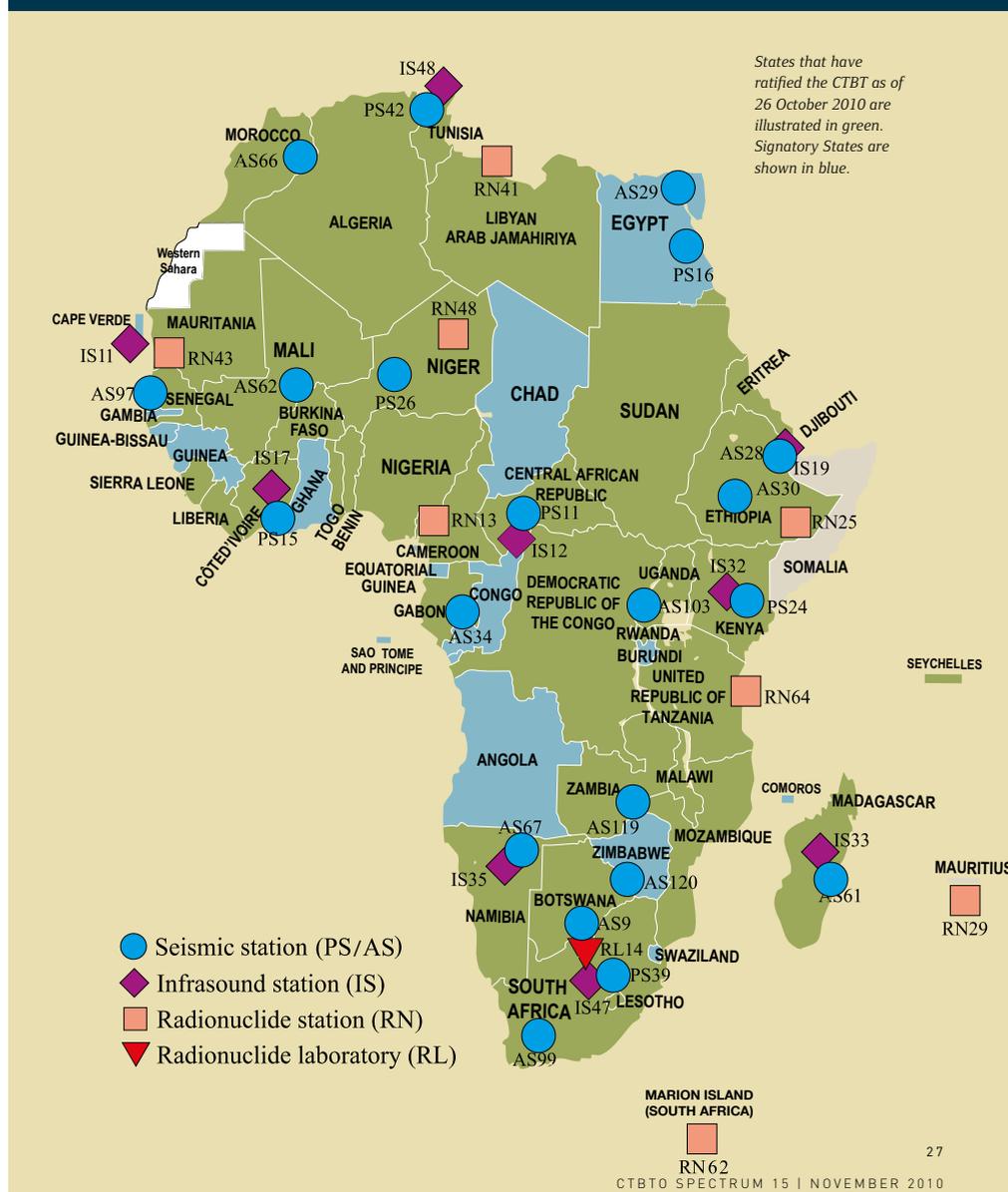
Many of the development challenges confronting Africa can be attributed to the military/political wars in the region and other parts of the world.

The CAR is a vast territory covering an area of 623,000 km² with a population of only four and a half million. The country is extremely rich in natural resources (diamonds, cobalt, gold, iron,

oil, uranium etc.) So one might ask why my country is facing development challenges. Over the years, a number of political conflicts have destroyed the economy, generating unemployment. The CAR is currently ranked among the poorest countries in the world, with a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS compared to many other countries.

Since these factors greatly inhibit development, it is time to propose solutions to these problems. I realized that one such solution would be ratification of the CTBT, which is, in my opinion, one guarantor of international security and peace.

MAP OF AFRICA INDICATING ALL IMS FACILITIES PLANNED FOR THE CONTINENT



[1] Primary seismic stations send data continuously in real time to the International Data Centre in Vienna.

»As a full member of the CTBTO, the CAR will now benefit from accessing IDC products.«

The CAR needs security and peace to ensure the sustainable use of its natural resources mentioned above, and especially uranium from Bakouma in the east of the country. We all know that uranium is a raw material with two main applications: for military purposes, whereby it is used to make nuclear weapons, which can cause mass destruction, and for peaceful purposes, where uranium is used to fuel nuclear power plants. Of particular concern is the fact that uranium ore could be stolen by terrorists to make nuclear bombs.

When I realized the great danger posed by nuclear weapons, I became aware of the importance of ratifying the CTBT. By establishing a global network of monitoring stations, the CTBTO is helping to make the world a safer place by ensuring that no nuclear explosion goes undetected. I therefore felt that it was in my country's interests to proceed with ratification as quickly as possible. Another incentive to ratify were the advantages offered to CTBTO Member States that host IMS facilities, as described above.

The commitment of African States to the CTBT was also supported by the entry into force of the Treaty of Pelindaba in July 2009, which turned the African continent into a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Based on your personal experience, what do you think would be the most effective way to encourage the remaining 15 States in Africa that have not yet ratified the CTBT to do so? What can they learn from the example of the Central African Republic?

As I explained, it requires willingness, perseverance, and a commitment to succeed in order to achieve CTBT ratification.

With regard to the 15 countries in Africa that have not yet ratified the CTBT, I think that there is sometimes a lack of information and communication about the merits of the CTBTO's activities. To my knowledge, many people including some politicians in Africa and various other countries in the world, misunderstand or ignore the importance of ratification. For some, it is not ignorance, but can be

attributed to other factors. The training that I received from the CTBTO meant that I was responsible for all CTBT-related information, allowing me to follow the organization's activities constantly and discuss the CTBT with the relevant authorities. After several years of information campaigns and sensitization about the Treaty, I succeeded in obtaining the support and commitment of the State Minister of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics, who was able to convey the message to policy makers in our country.

However, had I not acquired the necessary technical expertise, it would have been hard for me to convince the CAR authorities about the benefits of ratification. If this is also the case in the remaining 15 African countries, I think it would be desirable for CTBTO staff to carry out awareness-raising missions among the relevant authorities by meeting with Heads of State and National Assemblies in each country to discuss the importance of ratification.

I think and hope that this could accelerate the process of CTBT ratification by these 15 African States and would further strengthen the commitment of the continent to the Treaty of Pelindaba. I appeal to the authorities of the 15 outstanding African countries to ratify the CTBT as soon as possible to strengthen security



Mount Nyamulagira in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo erupted on 2 January 2010.
Credits: RMCA - B. Smets.

and peace on the African continent, and, in particular, to accelerate the process of the CTBT's entry into force, making the world a safer place.

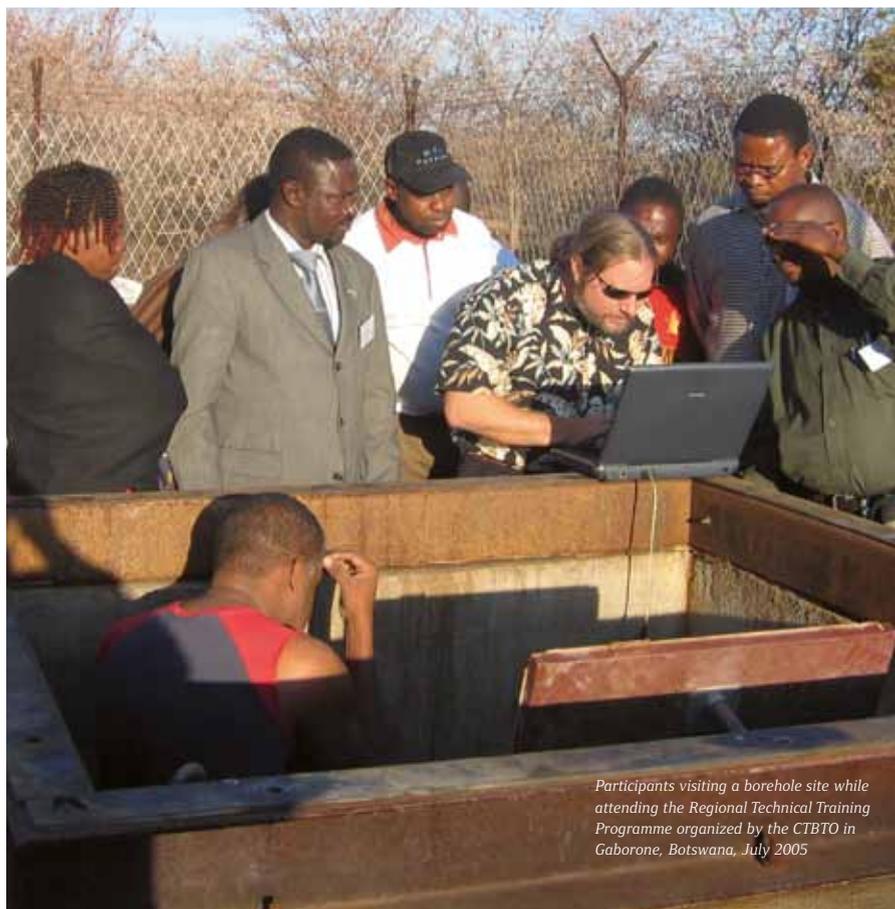
Between 2004 and 2010, you participated in several CTBTO training programmes. What knowledge have you acquired through your participation and how have you been able to share your skills with your colleagues in the Central African Republic?

In March 2004 and March 2007, I participated in Training Programmes for Station Operators and National Data Centre (NDC) Managers at the International Data Centre (IDC) in Vienna. In July 2005, I attended a Regional Technical Training Programme organized by the CTBTO in Gaborone, Botswana. Most recently in May 2010, I took part in a Technical Training Programme on the four scientific methods employed by the IMS.

These CTBTO training activities have helped me to gain knowledge in the following areas:

1. The history of nuclear testing since 1945
2. The Treaty and the objectives of the CTBTO
3. The role of the IDC and the four verification technologies employed by the IMS (seismic, hydroacoustic, infrasound and radionuclide monitoring)
4. How to maintain IMS stations and ensure their sustainability
5. The Global Communications Infrastructure and the transmission of data from IMS stations to the IDC
6. On-site inspections
7. Membership benefits for CTBTO Members States

This knowledge has enabled me to talk about the CTBTO to my relatives, friends, and some of my law professors at the University of Bangui. I sent letters with relevant information to certain authorities in the country, met with them, and eventually shared this knowledge with my colleagues in the Department of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics. In this way, we were able to achieve CTBT ratification.



Participants visiting a borehole site while attending the Regional Technical Training Programme organized by the CTBTO in Gaborone, Botswana, July 2005

Would the application of verification data be useful for the Central African Republic in terms of, for example, helping to improve aviation safety by detecting volcanic explosions, and contributing to climate change research?

The Central African Republic, like the rest of the world, strives for security and peace at the national, sub regional, regional and international level. To ensure development, my country needs to be secure. The advanced technologies and scientific methods employed by the CTBTO to monitor the planet for nuclear explosions are very important and beneficial for the CAR. My country is also concerned about earthquakes, climate change, and aviation safety problems caused by volcanic ash. The CAR is privileged to be situated in the heart of Africa and is keen to provide reliable data for the detection of natural disasters from the IMS station it hosts, through its National Data Centre in Bangui to the IDC in Vienna.

As a full member of the CTBTO, the CAR will now benefit from the advantages offered by the CTBTO in terms of accessing IDC products. There are a number of potential civil and scientific applications of the monitoring data such as enhancing the knowledge, capacities, and well-being of the population, and promoting the country's sustainable development.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CTBTO TRAINING ACTIVITIES PLEASE GO TO WWW.CTBTO.ORG.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MICHEL NAMBOBONA

is the first appointed Director General of the new National Data Centre of Bangui, which was created on 24 July 2010. Prior to this, he was Director of Electricity and Hydrocarbons and Deputy Coordinator of the National Agency for Radiation Protection at the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Hydraulics. An engineering geologist by profession, Dr Nambobona was in charge of the seismic station at the Geophysical Observatory of Bangui from 1994 to 2008.