Looking back, looking forward

The Cook Islands' support for the multiple global benefits of the CTBT
The Cook Islands’ support for international efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons and halt nuclear weapons testing can best be understood at three different but inter-related levels.

NUCLEAR TESTING – A CAUSE FOR CONCERN IN THE REGION

From the initial settlement centuries ago of the fifteen islands in the centre of the South Pacific that history has subsequently come to know as ‘the Cook Islands’, there has been an intimate cultural and economic relationship between Cook Islanders and the surrounding ocean. From birth, generations of Cook Islanders have had a deep appreciation that the ‘Moana Nui o Kiva’, the great Pacific Ocean, is not only a maritime highway, connecting one island to another, but also the marine farm from which Cook Islanders harvest a major part of their daily sustenance. Any activities threatening the degradation of the marine environment would be unacceptable.

It was against that fundamental world view that Cook Islanders watched with growing concern as, in the post-World War II period, different world powers undertook nuclear testing programmes in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in Micronesia in the late 1940s and 1950s, on Christmas and Malden Islands (some 1,200 km from the Northern Cook Islands) in the North Pacific in the 1950s, and on Mururoa and Fangataufa Islands in French Polynesia (some 2,400 km east of the Cook Islands’ main island, Rarotonga) from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Cook Islanders perceived a possible threat to the maritime environment and the marine food supply from such tests, not only because the Cook Islands is the closest country to Mururoa and Fangataufa but also because many of the living resources on which they depended were highly migratory in nature and could possibly have originated in waters where testing had been carried out. That many of the tests were atmospheric in nature also raised concerns among Cook Islanders about the possible harmful effects to their health from such testing. In addition, the conduct of nuclear testing activities on Mururoa had a detrimental impact on the Cook Islands’ economy, with visitors from beyond the Pacific opting for other destinations rather than visit islands where nuclear testing was perceived as taking place nearby.

TREATY OF RAROTONGA – A MAJOR REGIONAL INITIATIVE

To address the above concerns, and recognizing both the need to act collectively and its more general obligations as a member of the international community to promote peace and security, the Cook Islands increasingly turned its attention to initiatives at the Pacific regional level, collaborating with neighbouring governments all of which shared similar concerns. At the very first Forum of Pacific Heads of State and Government in 1971, for example, the Cook Islands joined with others in expressing collective concern at the potential hazards that atmospheric tests posed to health, safety and marine life in the region and called for a cessation of nuclear testing in French Polynesia.

Over succeeding years, nuclear testing became an increasing focus of discussions for the Cook Islands and other regional States at annual Forum meetings and related activities. An important product of those efforts was the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, commonly known as the Treaty of Rarotonga. Adopted by Pacific Leaders on 6 August 1985 when they gathered for their annual Forum meeting on Rarotonga, the Cook Islands’ main island, the Treaty prohibits the testing, manufacturing, acquiring and stationing of nuclear explosive devices in any territory of Treaty parties. All five nuclear-weapon States (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) have signed the relevant Protocols. The Treaty and its Protocols reflect the region’s deep concern at the continuing nuclear arms race and the risk of nuclear war. Support for the objectives of the Treaty and Protocols continues to be promoted by the Cook Islands and its other regional partners.

THE CTBT: CENTRAL TO THE INTERNATIONAL DISARMAMENT AND NON-PROLIFERATION REGIME

In concluding the Treaty of Rarotonga, the Cook Islands and other Forum countries believed that such regional initiatives could contribute to efforts
at the international level to reverse the nuclear arms race and promote the national security of each country in the region and the common security of all.

Among such broader global efforts are a number of treaties to which the Cook Islands is a party, including the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, the Landmines Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention and, most directly related to nuclear weapons, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), signed by the Cook Islands on 5 December 1997. It subsequently ratified the CTBT on 6 September 2005, following the passage of implementing legislation with the unanimous support of all members through the Cook Islands Parliament.

Respecting the two core obligations of the CTBT as set out in Article 1 is, of course, fundamental. However, with Leaders of other States party to the Convention, my Government is also committed to doing whatever is possible within our available resources to promote the effective establishment and operation of a verification and monitoring regime, which is key to the CTBT’s success. On the basis of a facility agreement signed between the Cook Islands and the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) in 2000, there are already in place on Rarotonga as part of the CTBTO’s International Monitoring System an auxiliary seismic station and a radionuclide station. The latter station is a successor to one that had been hosted by the Cook Islands and operated by the National Radiation Laboratory of New Zealand for over 30 years at the site to monitor fallout from nuclear testing in the region.

My Government supports the Final Declaration of the Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the CTBT (the Article XIV Conference) held on 23 September 2011, which emphasized the central importance of the CTBT for the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime and the need to implement a wide range of measures, especially those aimed at the early entry into force of the CTBT. In force, the CTBT will make an important contribution to the peace and security interests of the Cook Islands.

My Government also welcomes and strongly encourages the application of CTBTO data for civil and scientific purposes, as was done in 2011 to assist Japanese authorities in issuing tsunami warnings that helped to save lives following the devastating 11 March Japanese earthquake as well as by providing information about the dispersal of radioactivity following the tragic nuclear accident at Fukushima. As experience has shown, the Pacific Islands region is not immune to the disastrous effects of tsunamis and the timely application of CTBTO data could well prevent deaths and destruction in the future. There are many benefits to be realized by the international community from entry into force of the CTBT. My Government commends the strenuous efforts to date of many countries and individuals to realize that goal and will strongly support continuing efforts in the future.

Henry Puna
was elected Prime Minister of the Cook Islands in November 2010, ending a decade of Democratic Party rule. He first stood for Parliament at the 2004 election and in 2006 was elected leader of the Cook Islands Party – one of the two major political parties in the Cook Islands since 1965. Prior to entering politics, Puna worked as a lawyer.