

INTERVIEW

Face to Face with
CTBTO Executive Secretary Tibor Tóth

Looking back, looking forward



Tibor Tóth addressing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other high-level dignitaries attending the CTBTO's 15th anniversary celebrations in Vienna, Austria, on 17 February 2012.

What is your first memory of nuclear weapons? How did it impact you at the time – and later in life?

As a general introduction to this interview let me say that I personally like history, but I do not like personal history. Whenever someone looks backwards it distracts the focus from the road ahead.

However, my first vivid recollection of the nuclear threat was a doomsday-like discussion with my family at the dining table. I was around eight years old at the time and did not understand too many of the details. Only decades later could I date this memory back to the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and understand how close the world had come to nuclear annihilation during those fateful days. The gloomy feeling at the family dining table – and probably at all dining tables around the world – is best described by what Jacqueline Kennedy told her husband John F. Kennedy at the height of the crisis: “I would like to die next to you, and the children do too.” While I don’t claim

that this experience propelled me into nuclear arms control from the age of eight, it has reminded me in later years that the Cuban Missile Crisis was not an abstract historical event that just happened there, then and to them – and that we might be wrong in assuming that something like this could never happen again.

How did you first become involved professionally in nuclear arms control issues?

I started my career in 1977 with the Hungarian Foreign Ministry where I dealt initially with European security and cooperation known as the Helsinki Process. My interest in arms control began with a six-month UN Disarmament Fellowship in 1980. It fascinated me how in arms control, policy is intertwined with very technical issues; I had some limited exposure to the latter through chemistry and physics at secondary school. During the fellowship, I saw all the major disarmament fora, and gained not just theoretical and practical

knowledge, but also the longer historical perspective of ups and many downs. For example, I had the chance to follow the activities of the Group of Scientific Experts (GSE) in Geneva, the forerunner of an effort to design a system to monitor the future test-ban treaty. Although the GSE actually started out a couple of years earlier, in the late 1970s, the CTBT was only concluded in 1996. For me this serves as a reminder of the required time frame for some of these efforts.

You have devoted a large part of your life to these issues. How would you analyse the current situation against a historical background?

I have been dealing throughout my career with the whole spectrum of global issues within the UN system, with the exception of trade, starting as a deputy attaché in Geneva and later as ambassador in Geneva, Vienna and The Hague. But weapons of mass destruction issues have provided the real learning curve about how much time and perseverance is needed for these efforts

to succeed. I've spent 15 years of my career dealing with the regulation of chemical weapons, another 15 years with biological weapons, and 17 years of my professional career concerned with nuclear weapons. If I try to apply what I have seen in these fields to the whole area of multilateralism, I think it really boils down to regulation: how much regulation is enough, and where a regulation deficit might be a problem. There are parallels to other areas of multilateralism such as economic governance. The commonality is that in different areas the lack of cooperation through regulation, a "free-for-all" approach, might be critical and even lead to disasters over time – a major recession, in the case of economics. For nuclear arms control, we have to ask ourselves: Do we have a sufficient and sustainable level of cooperative security versus open ended competition? And there is the time factor, too: Are we moving at the right pace if we want to reduce over 17,000 nuclear weapons to global zero?

You were one of the first office-holders at the newly established CTBTO when you were appointed Chairperson of Working Group A for administrative and financial issues. What memories do you have?

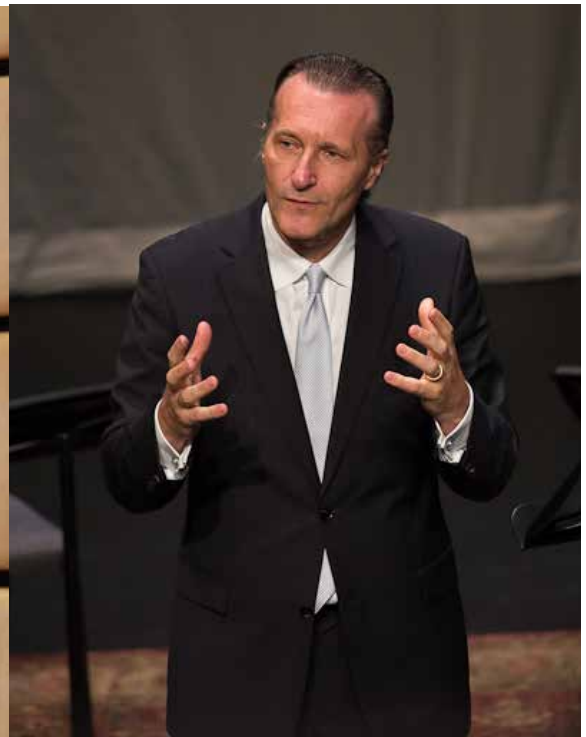
We literally started from scratch back in March 1997. In order to draft the organization's first programme and budget, I had to find a box to put the computer on, look for a chair and organize a secretary. I admit that our first draft programme and budget (P&B) bore a striking similarity to the IAEA's P&B; with its multi-layered programmatic approach it was a bit of an overkill for an organization that was just starting up. But we got off to a flying start, and in record time we succeeded in putting in place all of the key financial and administrative regulations, which enabled the organization to run smoothly. This was really the administrative/legal glue for everything else that we have done since then.

What have been the key technical and political developments relating to the CTBT since it opened for signature in 1996?

In a nutshell: We managed to push the nuclear test genie back into the bottle. Before the CTBT, there were on average four to five hundred nuclear weapon tests every decade. They were both political and environmental pollutants. This decade, there have only been three – still, three unfortunate nuclear tests too many. One hundred and eighty-three countries have thrown their political and moral weight behind the no-test norm. We have built a system unprecedented not only in reach but also in complexity: Both the basic monitoring technologies – seismic, infrasound, hydroacoustic, radionuclide and noble gas – as well as the support technologies – atmospheric transport modelling, information and communication, could each function as independent global systems. Together, they constitute a system of systems. And with on-site inspections, you have



Tibor Tóth addressing participants attending the Advanced Science Course in Vienna, Austria, 28 November 2011.



Tibor Tóth addressing the audience at the Reykjavik event in New York, USA, 27 September 2012.

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an additional layer of verification muscle, a cluster of another one dozen technologies with sub-sets of technologies.

What effect do you think ratification by the United States will have on other hold out states?

Let me come back to the parallels of security and economic policies. If country 'A' tries to maximize its financial and trade advantages at the expense of country 'B', it must ask itself, "Could it lead to less prosperity for me as well? Is this a sustainable solution for my own well-being?" There are striking similarities between unilateral protectionism in the economic fields and nuclear arms races, be it globally or regionally.

Most, if not all of the eight missing countries are in the Asian-Pacific and Middle Eastern regions, where the world's political hotspots can be found. A deficit in regulation, in cooperative norms between countries, is characteristic for these regions in the field of security policy. An absence of insurance policies, if you will. So each of the eight countries should ask itself whether the absence of cooperative norms in the field of nuclear weapons testing is beneficial to its own long-term security. They should ask of themselves whether the Cuban missile crisis was an event which happened "there, then and to them" but it cannot happen "here, now and to us." I firmly believe that it's not up

to the other 159 countries that have ratified the Treaty to convince the remaining eight. The only country that can convince the United States is the United States itself; even if the U.S. ratifies, the only one to convince China is China, the only country to convince India is India, and so on. Again, we need patience and perseverance. Take a look at the issue of chemical weapons: the first time they were discussed was in St. Petersburg in 1868, while the Chemical Weapons Convention only entered into force in 1997 and still we are only 80% through with the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles. The only question is how much additional time leased from our future do we have and will we be given the luxury of spending another 50 years without a 21st Century equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis?

What importance do you attach to disarmament education?

My experience of being introduced to this issue through a disarmament fellowship programme at the very beginning of my career was an eye-opener. We have to think about the future and reach out early enough to those who will be pushing for arms control regulations in the years to come. Through the CTBTO's Capacity Development Initiative, we've trained and educated station operators, National Data Centre staff, diplomats and other experts involved in the Treaty, hundreds of them in 2012 alone.

Besides enlarging the pool of CTBT experts, we have reached out to new audiences, to universities around the world. Just a month ago we hosted an event with representatives from more than 30 universities, not just from the United States or Europe but from all corners of the world. Participants included professors who are educating the future leaders. We are reaching out to countries which we could not reach otherwise and in 2012 we trained four times as many experts as people who work at the organization.

Multilateral security has become a business as complex as piloting an aircraft. It's extremely important that our future leaders have the right level of understanding about how complex this world is with the volume and the velocity of changes which are forever increasing.

Why is gender balance important in international organizations? How has the CTBTO helped to promote gender equality during your tenure? What remains to be done?

I coined the phrase "security is too important to be left just to men." I think it's important that we bring on board as many women as possible. I don't think the fact that this is an organization dealing with highly technical issues is an acceptable excuse not to do so. Yes, it is true that the percentage of women applicants for some of the technical jobs is less than 10%. But I am proud that now one-third of our professional colleagues are women. I am proud of the fact that two of my five deputies are women. But a lot remains to be done. In order to increase the percentage of women applying for technical jobs, and following a "double up" pledge I made on International Women's Day on 8 March 2012, the organization trained in just one year the same number of women as there are people working in the organization through the CTBTO's Capacity Development Initiative.

How has the CTBTO evolved since you became its Executive Secretary in 2005? What would you consider the biggest

challenge you have encountered and your greatest achievement?

I'd answer the first question with one phrase: "coming of age." The organization was eight years old when I took over; it will soon be 17 years old. It's very similar to watching a young child grow up and approach adulthood, becoming more self-confident, more mature. I think this is the best way to describe how the organization has evolved.

A challenging period was from 2006 to 2008, when the CTBTO underwent fundamental restructuring.

qualitatively, with the integration of the new infrasound component and including noble gas systems in our routine operations; the number of operational systems has increased during this time from eight to 30. We have found new ways of processing data, of improving the reliability and quality of data products, and of making all data available in near real-time to our 183 Member States. This is now a one billion dollar monitoring system supported by 4,000 people working around the globe and around the clock. This is a joint venture, unprecedented not just in size, complexity, and the

return to our member states and their citizens on their enormous investment in this organization and its monitoring system at the difficult moments of the Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami and the subsequent melt-down of the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

So the message is that all-inclusive multilateralism is not a passé matter. The other way around: it is very much alive and is the way to go in the future, if done correctly. I'm extremely proud of this organization's track record in this regard. It is multilateralism at its best.

»This is a joint venture, unprecedented not just in size, complexity, and the way in which all of the elements work in synergy but also in terms of all-inclusiveness: all-inclusive data gathering, transmission, processing and sharing of all the benefits.«

Also, due to the tenure limitation, I had to replace all the professional staff after seven years of service. While it was possible to negotiate a certain degree of flexibility for the tenure limitation, both these issues caused a lot of upheaval for the organization and, of course, stress for the individuals concerned.

Then in 2006, the CTBTO had to react to the first nuclear test by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the first of three unfortunate tests for the verification system, but it passed each test with flying colours. On top of that, the shortfall in contributions by one major contributor caused serious financial problems.

In terms of achievements, our monitoring network has increased from around 80 to nearly 300 stations since 2005, so around 90% of all our assets are in place, despite all of the challenges we've encountered. Monitoring capabilities have also improved

way in which all of the elements work in synergy but also in terms of all-inclusiveness: all-inclusive data gathering, transmission, processing and sharing of all the benefits.

I think that multilateral processes could take inspiration from this arrangement. There was a lot of soul-searching after the sobering United Nations Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009. One of the explanations offered was that such conferences do not work because there are simply too many players around the table. At the CTBTO with its near universal membership, we have proven the opposite. We have built, managed, operated and improved an incredibly complex system. And we have run it efficiently not just from a technical and management standpoint but also politically with the support of our Member States, for example, by reacting jointly to challenges such as the DPRK nuclear tests. And we provided the right



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

TIBOR TÓTH

has served as the Executive Secretary of the CTBTO since 2005 and will remain in that position until 31 July 2013. He has been actively involved in international disarmament and non-proliferation issues for over three decades. From 1990 to 1993 and from 2003 to 2005, he was the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Hungary to the UN in Geneva and to the UN in Vienna from 1997 to 2001. From 1996 to 2004 he served as Chairperson of the CTBTO's Working Group dealing with budgetary and administrative matters. He chaired the Biological Weapons Convention negotiations on an implementation and verification regime from 1992 to 2004.