There is hereby established the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization for the purpose of carrying out the necessary preparations for the effective implementation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and for preparing for the first session of the Conference of the States Parties to that Treaty.

– Adopted by CTBT signatory States at the United Nations, 19 November 1996

Nearly two decades ago, signatory States to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) voted to establish a Preparatory Commission to pave the way for implementation of a fully ratified treaty. By any measure, the new Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) was given a monumental task: to build a global verification regime to monitor compliance with the Treaty once it entered into force.

The CTBTO was given hundreds of complex and discrete assignments for creating this new regime, including developing operating instructions for seismological, radionuclide, hydroacoustic and infrasound monitoring; establishing an International Data Centre and global communications systems for reporting and analyzing information; and adopting procedures for on-site inspections.

Around the same time, another preparatory committee, formed in 1993 when the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) was adopted, was winding up its work. It would go out of business four years after its creation, when the CWC entered into force in April 1997.

Signatories to the CTBT may not have anticipated the creation of a global verification regime and full ratification in a similar time frame, but surely they didn’t imagine there would still be need for a so-called “Preparatory” Commission well into the 21st century.

And there isn’t. Today, the CTBTO Preparatory Commission has achieved all it was called upon to do and more. Not only is it setting up a global surveillance system with 337 monitoring facilities (of which 281 have already been certified) that is supported by global communications infrastructure, it has done the delicate and no less important work of building relationships among the countries that make up the system. Although Member States clearly own the stations that make up the CTBTO’s International Monitoring System and the information they provide, States ensure that the stations transmit vast amounts of data every day to the CTBTO’s headquarters in Vienna for analysis. As a result, the world now has the technical ability to identify any activity that would be a breach of the Treaty – and to get there, the CTBTO has built a network of unheralded and enviable engagement among countries.

The verification system also comes with a tremendous side benefit for humanity. Data generated by the CTBTO’s monitoring stations offer a host of civil and scientific applications, such as contributing to disaster mitigation. For example, the CTBTO shares data with a number of tsunami warning centres and also tracked the dispersal of radioactive emissions after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident in March 2011.

With all of that work done, the idea that the CTBTO is still in the “preparatory” stage is absurd. Nearly two decades after it was created, the CTBTO today is managing the system it has built and awaiting the Treaty’s entry into force. It is no longer paving the way. As CTBTO Executive Secretary Lassina Zerbo said in 2014 in a speech to mark the International Day against Nuclear Testing, “Although still labelled as a ‘preparatory’ organisation, we are anything but preparatory in our work.” The CTBTO has proven the concept that a system of verification could be built and that it could work – the basis upon which many countries signed onto the Treaty in the first place. Those who haven’t ratified should no longer be given the cover offered by the suggestion that preparatory work is still underway. The CTBTO has fulfilled its task and built a remarkable verification regime. It’s time to be honest about that and remove the word “preparatory” from its name.