Banning the Bang – Creating the CTBT

As 2016 marks the CTBT’s 20th anniversary of opening for signature, this provides a unique occasion to step back and reflect on what has been achieved so far. In 1996, after tough negotiations in Geneva, the CTBT began its journey of seeking entry into force.

During the last century, over 2,000 nuclear tests were conducted at locations around the globe. As the pace of nuclear testing increased during the Cold War, the damage done to international security, the environment, and human health drew global condemnation, and led to the question of how nuclear testing could be abolished.

In the early 1970s, the Conference on Disarmament (CD), built the foundation for banning nuclear tests. However, the PTBT only banned nuclear testing in outer space, the atmosphere, and underwater – not underground. Furthermore, the PTBT did not have a global verification system and relied on national monitoring techniques to ensure adherence. A comprehensive regime was therefore required and recognized in the preamble of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. The NPT compels its 191 Member States to “...seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time and to continue negotiations to this end.”

The Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), opened for signature in 1963, established a verification system for nuclear testing. However, the PTBT only banned nuclear testing in outer space, the atmosphere, and underwater – not underground. Furthermore, the PTBT did not have a global verification system and relied on national monitoring techniques to ensure adherence. A comprehensive regime was therefore required and recognized in the preamble of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. The NPT compels its 191 Member States to “...seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time and to continue negotiations to this end.”

The only major area of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament negotiations where the end is in sight, yet where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests.«

JOHN F. KENNEDY
35th President of the United States (1961)

In the early 1970s, the Conference on Disarmament (CD) commissioned a Group of Scientific Experts to explore technologies and data analysis methods for an independent, and internationally controlled, verification system for nuclear testing. Over the next 20 years, this scientific groundwork, coupled with political will garnered through the Ad Hoc Committee on a Nuclear Test Ban, produced the international consensus required for the commencement of CTBT negotiations in 1994. Between 1994 and 1996, tough negotiations took place to establish, among others, the monitoring and inspection of the Treaty, its entry into force, and a supporting organization’s mandate. On 22 August 1996, Belgium submitted the final CTBT text to the CD as a national paper that, in turn, allowed the CD to forward the Treaty to the United Nations General Assembly.

Australia, along with 127 co-sponsors, introduced a resolution containing the Treaty text to the United Nations General Assembly on 9 September 1996. Only 3 countries voted against the resolution, 5 abstained, and 158 voted in its favour. After the vote, United States President Bill Clinton remarked, “We’re taking the next crucial step to lift the dark cloud of nuclear fear which has hung over the world for fifty years”. The CTBT was opened for signature by the Depositary of the Treaty, United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, on 24 September 1996 in New York. Within 24 hours, 71 states had signed the Treaty, including all five Nuclear Weapons States.

The first meeting of the Preparatory Commission of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) convened in November 1996. Since 1997, the CTBTO has implemented the verification regime, as well as worked to promote ratification, so that the Treaty can finally enter into force.
In the early 1970s, the Conference on Disarmament (CD) commissioned a Group of Scientific Experts to explore technologies and data analysis methods for an independent, and internationally controlled, verification system for nuclear testing. Over the next 20 years, this scientific groundwork, coupled with political will gained through the Ad Hoc Committee on a Nuclear Test Ban, produced the international consensus required for the commencement of CTBT negotiations in 1994. Between 1994 and 1996, tough negotiations took place to establish, among others, the monitoring and inspection of the Treaty, its entry into force, and a supporting organization’s mandate. On 22 August 1996, Belgium submitted the final CTBT text to the CD as a national paper that, in turn, allowed the CD to forward the Treaty to the United Nations General Assembly.

The Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), opened for signature in 1963, laid the foundation for banning nuclear tests. However, the PTBT only banned nuclear testing in outer space, the atmosphere, and underwater—not underground. Furthermore, the PTBT did not have a global verification system and relied on national monitoring techniques to ensure adherence. A comprehensive regime was therefore needed and recognized in the preamble of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968; the NPT compels its 191 Member States to “...seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time and to continue negotiations to this end.”

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) convened in November 1996. Since 1997, the CTBTO has implemented the verification regime, as well as worked to promote ratification, so that the Treaty can finally enter into force.

The only major area of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament negotiations where the end is in sight, yet where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests.«

JOHN F. KENNEDY
35th President of the United States (1961)

Banning the Bang – Creating the CTBT

As 2016 marks the CTBT’s 20th anniversary of opening for signatures, this provides a unique occasion to step back and reflect on what has been achieved so far. In 1996, after tough negotiations in Geneva, the CTBT began its journey of seeking entry into force.

During the last century, over 2,000 nuclear tests were conducted at locations around the globe. As the pace of nuclear testing increased during the Cold War, the damage done to international security, the environment, and human health drew global condemnation, and led to the question of how nuclear testing could be abolished.

The Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), opened for signature in 1963, laid the foundation for banning nuclear tests. However, the PTBT only banned nuclear testing in outer space, the atmosphere, and underwater—not underground. Furthermore, the PTBT did not have a global verification system and relied on national monitoring techniques to ensure adherence. A comprehensive regime was therefore needed and recognized in the preamble of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968; the NPT compels its 191 Member States to “...seek to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time and to continue negotiations to this end.”

In 1996, after tough negotiations in Geneva, the CTBT began its journey of seeking entry into force.

Between 1994 and 1996, tough negotiations took place to establish, among others, the monitoring and inspection of the Treaty, its entry into force, and a supporting organization’s mandate. On 22 August 1996, Belgium submitted the final CTBT text to the CD as a national paper that, in turn, allowed the CD to forward the Treaty to the United Nations General Assembly.

In 1996, after tough negotiations in Geneva, the CTBT began its journey of seeking entry into force.

Between 1994 and 1996, tough negotiations took place to establish, among others, the monitoring and inspection of the Treaty, its entry into force, and a supporting organization’s mandate. On 22 August 1996, Belgium submitted the final CTBT text to the CD as a national paper that, in turn, allowed the CD to forward the Treaty to the United Nations General Assembly.