

**Informal Meeting of the General Assembly to mark the Observance of the
International Day against Nuclear Tests
9 September 2015
Towards Zero: Resolving the Contradictions**

New Zealand is pleased to take part in today's meeting to mark the Fifth International Day Against Nuclear Testing.

We acknowledge and pay tribute to Kazakhstan on this 20th Anniversary of the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. That event marked a decisive moment in the international move away from nuclear testing.

When we look back on the 70 years since the dawn of the nuclear age, it is important to remember that, at its inception, the splitting of the atom seemed to herald an age of great promise. Our ability to unleash the power of the atom seemed to presage the opportunity for a step change in human development.

Sadly, that has not proved to be the case. The peaceful uses of nuclear energy have been a mixed blessing at best – as events at Fukushima in 2011, in Chernobyl in 1986, and in Three Mile Island in 1979 demonstrated. Meanwhile, the world is still struggling to deal with the consequences of our over-reliance on fossil fuels.

On the military side, the picture is much darker. In the second half of the last century, more than 2,000 nuclear tests were conducted - over 40 every year between 1961 and 1984 – as nuclear arsenals grew to the point that they ceased to serve any rational military purpose.

Meanwhile, the environments in which those tests were conducted were severely compromised, with grave consequences for their inhabitants.

As is well known, for much of the Cold War period, the South Pacific was used to test nuclear weapons designed to buttress a northern hemisphere deterrent.

At least 285 atmospheric and underground tests were carried out in the Pacific in the five decades following World War II.

Those responsible for these tests believed they were carrying out activities essential for the security of their citizens and allies.

And, in the early years at least, there was a common but inadequate appreciation of the impacts of nuclear fallout, both in the atmosphere and underground and under water.

However, the communities inhabiting these sites were amongst the smallest and most vulnerable in the world. As a result of exposure to nuclear radiation, some experienced environmental and health effects that persist to this day and across generations, while areas of ancestral land remain out of bounds to disposed descendants.

These horrible realities were pivotal in convincing the people of the Pacific that nuclear weapons have no place in our region.

They were a major driver in efforts by New Zealand and others in the region to push for a comprehensive test ban, towards establishing the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty in 1985, and in New Zealand's decision to pass our own New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone and Disarmament Act in 1987 - legislation which has come to occupy a special position in our national and international identity.

There have been important developments since that time. Of particular significance was the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty - a measure for which New Zealand and others pressed in the General Assembly for many decades.

When this Treaty is in force, it will provide a legally-binding and verifiable means to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and restrict the modernisation of existing nuclear arsenals.

Delays in bringing the CTBT into force remain a source of enormous frustration for states like New Zealand.

We recognise and acknowledge those nuclear weapon states - declared and undeclared - that have refrained from testing since the Treaty's adoption in 1996. But voluntary moratoria are no substitute for a legally-binding treaty. Further concrete steps towards bringing the CTBT into force remain a key priority; as is ratification by the nine outstanding Annex II states.

We welcome the fact that Congo and Angola have become party to the CTBT since we last commemorated this day.

We welcome also the 25th UN Conference on Disarmament Issues held in Hiroshima last month against the backdrop of the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

These are positive steps. But in the past year we have also witnessed another failure to reach agreement at the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The reasons for that failure were both general and specific – a refusal by the nuclear weapon states to acknowledge the general disarmament responsibilities they took on when they joined the NPT and a specific failure of commitments in relation to a conference on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

It is a sad reflection of our times that this most recent failure of the NPT Review process barely scratched the public consciousness. Yet the longer this stasis on nuclear disarmament persists, the greater the danger of miscalculation by those who possess nuclear weapons and the greater the risk of nuclear weapons capability falling into the hands of terrorists.

That is why we must not be complacent and must continue to press for a legally binding end to nuclear testing and genuine progress towards nuclear disarmament.