
Statement by Dr Lassina Zerbo

Executive Secretary

**High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly to
Commemorate and Promote the International Day against Nuclear Tests**

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Madam President
Secretary General
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to convey my deepest appreciation to Her Excellency María Fernanda Espinosa for the invitation to deliver a keynote statement during today's High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly to commemorate and promote 29 August as the International Day against Nuclear Tests.

As Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, annual events commemorating the International Day against Nuclear Tests have always been near and dear to my heart.

They serve as an important and stark reminder to the world of the disastrous consequences of nuclear testing on human health and the environment.

They help to highlight the role that Kazakhstan has played in ensuring the issue of nuclear testing remains at the forefront of the global agenda.

And they underscore the significant progress that has been achieved in putting an end to nuclear testing for all time.

But most importantly, the International Day against Nuclear Tests provides an opportunity to send a clear and unmistakable message to the international community that our work is not yet done. The business of ending nuclear tests for all time remains unfinished.

For this reason, it is my hope that today's commemoration will help to inspire countries to take concrete measures that will allow us to finally reach our objective of a world free from the dangers of nuclear testing. And the only path that will lead us to this noble goal is through the verifiability of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and its universalization.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As with each commemoration in past years, it is my distinct pleasure to take part in this year's High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly to Commemorate and Promote the International Day against Nuclear Tests.

However, this year I am doubly honoured, and yet saddened at the same time. Recently, the international community lost a true friend and ally with the passing of Yukiya Amano, the late Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Yukiya Amano was an outstanding champion for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and was dedicated to implementing effective controls to ensure that nuclear materials and technology would not be diverted for non-peaceful purposes.

On 29 August this year, I was honoured and humbled to be jointly awarded the Nazarbayev Prize for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World and Global Security – together with the late Yukiya Amano – by First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev .

Nursultan Nazarbayev made the historic decision to renounce the possession of nuclear arms, send the nuclear warheads in Kazakhstan to Russia, and permanently close the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site.

These decisions may seem obvious now, but it took great courage and leadership. And I thank him and the people of Kazakhstan for their unwavering support for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

I say people because in the end, it is people who will make tough decisions. It is people who will provide leadership. First President Nursultan Nazarbayev demonstrated that peace, security and prosperity do not depend on the possession of nuclear weapons. In fact, he understood that there was much more to gain from denuclearizing than going forward as a nuclear possessor State.

He also understood, thanks to the dedicated scientists and civil servants, as well as ordinary folks who had been affected by the nuclear tests, that there was no future in retaining a nuclear test capability at the Semipalatinsk test site. The people of Kazakhstan had already paid too high a price for the nearly 500 nuclear tests that were conducted at this site. The closing of Semipalatinsk would be just the first of many steps taken by Kazakhstan to advance the vision of a nuclear weapon free world.

It was decision making at the highest level that led to the final closure of the test site. But it was also thanks to the unyielding determination of the people of Kazakhstan to decide their own future, a future where the testing or possession of nuclear weapons had no place.

At the head of the public movement to close the test site was Mr Olzhas Suleimenov, a poet, writer, politician, diplomat and anti-nuclear activist. Educated as a geologist, Suleimenov initiated and led the popular “Nevada—Semipalatinsk” movement in 1989, which sought to close the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site and other nuclear test sites around the world.

There was also Mr Tolegen Mukhamedzhanov, an active participant of the “Nevada-Semipalatinsk” movement, as well as a friend and colleague of Suleimenov. He was a composer of symphonies, operas, chamber music, and popular instrumental music, as well as

music for films and theatre productions. He composed the famous song “Zaman-ai”, which became the hymn of public protest against nuclear testing.

While charismatic and unifying figures were deeply important in this movement, let us not forget about the scientists who were determined to collect and analyse the data on the impact of nuclear testing on the local population.

Professor Bakhiya Atchabarov, of the Institute of Regional Pathology, Kazakh Academy of Sciences, headed clinical expeditions from 1957 to 1960. These expeditions examined 3,500 local residents and an additional 2,000 non-local people as a control group. As a result, the expedition teams were able to collect thousands of what have been called “heart-breaking” data points that filled twelve classified volumes.

And of course there is my dear, dear friend Karipbek Kuyukov, who after being born without arms as a result of nuclear radiation exposure, has devoted his life to ensuring that no one else suffers from the destructive effects of nuclear tests.

Karipbek is a true inspiration. He shares his story through his own art, which depicts the life, culture and struggles that he has known as a victim of nuclear testing. As an honorary Ambassador to the *The ATOM Project* (Abolish Testing Our Mission), Karipbek uses his voice and artistic vision to educate others about the need for a total and complete end to nuclear testing as a way to achieve a world free from nuclear weapons.

These are but just a few examples of the people who have played important roles in the closing of the Semipalatinsk test site. We are here today to acknowledge their bravery and determination, and to celebrate their stories as we push forward in our quest for a world free from the dangers of nuclear testing through the entry into force of the CTBT.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was recently in Funafuti, Tuvalu, to participate in the 50th Pacific Islands Forum. This year’s Forum took place in the same place where thirty-five years earlier the 15th South Pacific Forum decided that a nuclear free zone be established in the South Pacific.

The resulting treaty – the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone, or Treaty of Rarotonga – embodied the determination of a local population, represented by sovereign States, to live in peace and independence and protect their people and environment. The Treaty of Rarotonga would prohibit the possession, use, testing or stationing of nuclear weapons by any country.

As with the movement to close the Semipalatinsk test site, this determination was driven by the legacy of nuclear testing in the region. The devastating impacts of these tests on the people and environment in the South Pacific continue to be an issue of concern today.

During the discussions at this year’s Forum, I was struck by the immensity of challenges facing the region. Whether it was how to increase capacities with limited resources, how to improve educational opportunities and spur economic growth, or how to mitigate the consequences of a changing climate, one thing was clear to me – the solution to every challenge would require active cooperation and collaboration both within the region, and with the international community more broadly.

The same message rings true with the CTBT. Without the international scientific cooperation that laid the groundwork for its verification regime, we would not be able to say with confidence today that the system has reached a state of readiness to provide adequate verification of the Treaty.

And without the multilateral diplomacy that took place throughout the past five decades, we would not have the CTBT at all. Likewise, bringing the CTBT into force and fulfilling the overarching objective of the International Day against Nuclear Tests will require concerted and sustained multilateral efforts at every step.

Scientists, diplomats, politicians, academics, the media and all of civil society can play a role. The next generation, with their intuition and spirit of innovation, have and will continue to contribute to the cause. The CTBTO Youth Group, with its more than 700 strong membership, has raised its voice in support of a peaceful and prosperous future, free from the dangers of nuclear testing.

But in the end, it will be the States themselves that will make the sovereign decision on whether to join the overwhelming international consensus against nuclear testing. By doing so, we will have put in place perhaps the most effective, and symbolic, measure that will lead us to a world free from nuclear weapons.

Let us commemorate the decision of First President Nazarbayev to end nuclear testing forever on the Kazakh Steppe. Let us honour the victims and celebrate the citizen heroes who fought for an end to nuclear testing in their backyard.

Let us recognize the will of the Pacific Islands States to live without the fear of nuclear weapons and nuclear testing. Let us respect the desire of the Member States of all the nuclear-weapon-free-zones to renounce nuclear weapons and nuclear testing in their regions.

And let us do this by embracing multilateral solutions as the most effective, and ultimately necessary, way to address the threat of nuclear proliferation.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The risk of nuclear proliferation and the threat of nuclear terrorism continue to pose great challenges for the international community.

In order to guarantee the continued viability of nuclear power for peace and development, we must reinforce and build upon the legal framework that has been painstakingly established to keep nuclear risks low, while ensuring that countries can continue to benefit from the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

The CTBT is a crucial, and long overdue, step that will help to ensure the continued vitality of the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. If we work together, I am confident we can achieve this noble aim. Let us mark this International Day against Nuclear Tests by strengthening our commitment to put an end to nuclear tests once and for all.

Thank you.