

25th anniversary of closure of world's largest nuclear test site: time to act

By H.E. Erlan Idrissov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Originally published in The Hill, 26th August 2016

It may seem strange that the closing of a nuclear test site 25 years ago should play such a prominent role in defining a country's history and global purpose. But these doubts – and the reasons for the solemn celebration of this anniversary – fade when the impact of the Semipalatinsk site on Kazakhstan is fully understood.

The huge site, in the east of our country, was the center of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapon testing program. Its first ever nuclear test took place there on Aug. 29, 1949. Over the next 40 years, it was followed by 455 additional nuclear explosions.

When those first nuclear devices were exploded, the potential effects of radiation or contamination, even when known, were seen as far less important than the arms race. Elderly residents tell of being encouraged out of their homes to witness the first explosions and mushroom clouds.

As a result of this ignorance and failure, the UN estimates that up to 1.5 million people in Kazakhstan were exposed to high radiation levels. It was not long before many began to suffer from ill health, early deaths and birth defects.

This terrible impact remained hidden for many years from the wider public. But as the health and environmental damage became better known, it fueled fierce opposition at every level across the country to nuclear testing.

It led to the decision by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to shut down the Semipalatinsk site exactly 42 years after the first test took place even before we became a fully-independent country. This move, made against the interests of the Soviet military authorities, also set the scene for Kazakhstan to renounce voluntarily the world's fourth biggest nuclear arsenal which we inherited on the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Deciding to close a testing site and rid your country of nuclear weapons, however, is only a first step. Any responsible nation must also ensure the safe disposal of the weapons and materials. The urgent need to prevent nuclear material from falling into the wrong hands led to unprecedented – and at the time secret – co-operation between Kazakhstan, Russia and the United States, as well as other countries and organizations, over many years.

This stress on peace, dialogue and international co-operation has defined our foreign policy and place in the world ever since. We have been in the forefront of

the global campaign to end nuclear testing and to warn against the dangers of nuclear weapons.

Importantly, we have also shown that international influence and stature do not depend on nuclear firepower. Our recent election onto the United Nations Security Council – and good relations with a wide range of countries – is proof of our standing in the world. We have also been chosen to host the international low enriched uranium bank under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency which will start operating next year.

It would be comforting to believe that the years which have followed Kazakhstan's decisions have seen a reduction in the global threat to all our lives from nuclear weapons. But sadly this is not the case.

Still, there has been progress. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was agreed in 1996. We have seen the growth of nuclear weapons-free zones as we now have in Central Asia. The number of weapons, too, has been reduced.

But there are still 16,000 in existence – enough to destroy humanity many times over. Too many countries have still to ratify or sign the test ban treaty. And while the prospect of nuclear war between the main powers remains, thankfully, remote, we face a new and terrifying threat which hardly existed 25 years ago.

Violent extremists groups are actively trying to get their hands on nuclear weapons and technology. If they succeed, they would not hesitate to use them. For these terrorists, the greater the loss of life and destruction the better. The threat from nuclear weapons has scarcely ever been as great.

It is why President Nazarbayev has called for the mankind to set, as its main goal for this century, ridding our world of nuclear weapons by 2045, the centenary of the United Nations. Through his Manifesto, "The World. The 21st Century," he has produced a blueprint to show how this goal could be reached.

Kazakhstan is also using the 25th anniversary of Semipalatinsk site's closure to remind the world, from our own unique experience, of the human and environmental cost of nuclear weapons. This legacy will also form part of discussions at a high-level international conference in Astana on Aug. 29 – now the UN's International Day against Nuclear Tests – on how to create the climate where nuclear weapons can be removed entirely from our world and how to build momentum towards reaching this goal.

The last 25 years have shown this won't be easy. But we must step up our efforts to rebuild the trust needed. The example of Kazakhstan shows both the price to be paid if we fail and also what can be achieved with vision.

The author is Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan.