

# Rising from the scars of its nuclear past to push for a better world

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Ms Ela Gandhi (in brown), granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, leading a prayer for world peace at the defunct Semipalatinsk nuclear test site.

I am at ground zero.

In 1949, 67 years ago, a 22-kiloton atomic bomb exploded at this nuclear test site where I am now standing.

There would be 455 more explosions, each one more powerful and deadly than the last as the Cold War raged between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Many of them were carried out in the open before they were banned - the people responsible either not knowing the deadly effects of radioactive fallout or not caring.

Now, as I survey the vast open grassland, the air is still and silent, the last test having ended in 1989.

I am here with 60 others at the Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan, more than an hour by plane from the capital city of Astana and another two hours by bus.

Nothing much grows here except for the hardy grass that occupies much of these steppes of Central Asia. But there are signs here and there of its deadly past.

Every few kilometres, the remnants of a concrete watch tower stand, previously occupied by soldiers and scientists monitoring the results of those tests.

How many would later succumb to radiation sickness? No one among us knows the answer.

It is a grim reminder of how far the powers that be would go to produce enough weapons to annihilate all of mankind many times over.

We had earlier attended an international conference, Building a Nuclear-Free World, held to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Semipalatinsk's closure and the dramatic announcement in 1991 of the country's decision to deactivate its nuclear warheads and renounce their use.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev made the stunning move after his country found itself suddenly independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

He did not want the hundreds of nuclear warheads that were based here as part of Moscow's Cold War arsenal.

Instead he wanted Kazakhstan to be free of these weapons and to be a leading player in the effort to rid the world of them.

The Kazakh population had paid a heavy price for their brief flirtation with nuclear power, with an estimated one million exposed to radiation from those tests.

At the conference there were the usual calls for nuclear disarmament, made mostly by peace activists and diplomats. Among them was Ms Ela Gandhi, the granddaughter of Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi, who led a prayer session for peace at the test site.

Alas, the people who matter most, the ones who have their fingers on the doomsday button, did not attend.

Hopefully some of them will, at the Astana Peace Summit which President Nazarbayev announced would take place in November and to which government leaders will be invited. He also launched a Peace Prize to be conferred on a person or organisation which had done the most to promote nuclear disarmament.

These efforts may not amount to much in an increasingly dangerous world. Certainly not in North Korea, for example, which earlier this month tested its deadliest nuclear bomb so far.

But imagine what an even more troublesome world it would be if those nuclear warheads had remained in Kazakhstan.

Think how unstable Central Asia might have become if President Nazarbayev had not acted so decisively 25 years ago.

Instead of a nuclear arms race, there is a different race here to recreate the Old Silk Road and promote trade between East and West ([related article](#)).

## No prizes for guessing who deserves that peace prize.

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