

Why The World Needs To Be Constantly Reminded Of The Consequences Of Nuclear Weapons

*Blog by Karipbek Kuyukov, Honorary Ambassador of the ATOM Project
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KARAGANDA - I am one of those who have been affected by nuclear tests in Kazakhstan. As a result, I was born without arms. I doubt a regular person with two arms can understand what it is like to use your feet for basic things

like opening a door or grabbing a fork, or to sign your passport with your mouth. People stare at me. Then they empathise, but none can really, truly imagine what it is like, and no one really wants to.

I dream one day of standing up and facing all those who lobby for nuclear weapons. I want to look in their eyes and ask them why.

Kazakhstan is set to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the closure of the infamous Semipalatinsk nuclear test site on Aug. 29. Twenty-five years is a lot of time from a personal perspective, but little from a historic point of view. Twenty-five years is how much time Kazakhstan needed to become one of the leaders trying to marshal the world to become nuclear-safe - and not without its own share of losing. Yes, I am not afraid to use the word losing, because there are no winners in war: nuclear weapons were created for intimidating, controlling and murdering.

Twenty-five years of my life covers the important period of time starting from the years of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement and up to the recent ATOM Project initiatives. This period of time, thanks to such initiatives, supported by the will of the people, and the

wisdom of our President and other moral leaders such as Olzhas Suleimenov, Toktar Aubakirov and others, has propelled our country into a leadership role in nuclear non-proliferation. We are a part of that, and that is what we have to show for 25 years of hard, united work.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many things started crumbling: ideology, principles, morale. I remember the early 1990s - times were tough. They remind me of what I've learned about the great depression years in the U.S. I remember, like yesterday, how we had to break chairs and use the debris to start a fire in our yard to cook the raw meat of a slain sheep. What gave us strength and kept us going was our unity and the common cause - to survive. We gladly shared our last pieces of bread to make sure everyone got an equal part. We gave the last crumbs of bread to our youngsters, because we believed it was they who needed to make a change so nothing like this would happen again to their kids. These times are hard to forget, because they were recent, because they happened to me when I was old enough to remember, and because sometimes, when I am about to throw out a mouldy loaf of bread, I remember that there were times when I would have eaten even that.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan inherited what was at the time the fourth largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world. Had we kept that arsenal, we would be a different type of player in the region today. That would have been the easy way. We chose the hard way - winning hearts, earning our reputation, deserving trust. When the decree on the closure of the test site back in 1991 was signed, it was a victory for my family in particular, but also for our country, for the whole world.

Too many things have changed since then. We use smartphones as if they have been around for centuries. Our eyes have grown lazy and wish only be entertained; our hearts have become colder because these days we are seldom reminded of what hardships are,

so we can appreciate what we have, and because we are too busy buying what we can't afford, dreaming of what we can't have.

And what we have is a problem that is slipping away from our focus. We need to be constantly reminded of the dangers of the nuclear weapons. We need to address these issues and keep pressure on the key people who have the power to address this issue. There aren't too many in the world. We all know who they are. We need to maintain the dialogue.

As part of The ATOM Project, I travel around the world. I meet other people who have been affected by the consequences of nuclear weapons. I also meet young people and I always speak to them, always tell them about our country and what we endured. And as long as nuclear weapons exist, they could end up falling into the wrong hands - into the hands of terrorists for instance! This could trigger a worse outcome than the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The threat is real and we must constantly address it.

I believe that unity and common cause, which once saved my family, can give us the strength to fight the nuclear weapons we ourselves have created. I am not a naïve person. I realise the realities of fighting for a nuclear-weapons-free world today. But perhaps not in my time, but maybe in two generations, maybe in five generations, there will be solid changes. That hope also gives me the strength to keep pushing.

This is why events and days like Aug. 29 are very important - they remind us of those hardships, which must not be overlooked! They remind us that we need to tell our youth about the errors of the past, to not be intimidated by the madness of the few in control of the lives of millions of people.

One day, I dream of standing up and facing all those who lobby for nuclear weapons, I want to look in their eyes and ask them: “Is your cause worthier than mine? How does it keep me safer?”

The author is Honorary Ambassador of the ATOM Project, painter and antinuclear weapons activist.