

# Nuclear Non-Proliferation Talks Symbolize Hope

Op-Ed by Kiyotaka Akasaka, UN Under-Secretary-General  
for Communications and Public Information  
The Huffington Post (US)  
05/10/2010

The expression "fraught with symbolism" probably belongs to that class of overused phrases that dictionaries tend to dismiss as clichés. To me, however, those words seem to be a very fitting way to describe what was happening last week at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

The anchoring event of the week was the start of what is officially known as the 2010 Review Conference of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, hardly a metaphor-friendly title. But once you step through the thicket of diplomatic jargon, the life and death matters on the agenda of this month-long exercise cannot help but strike you, well, as "fraught with symbolism."

In his address to the opening of the conference last Monday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the audience that the chilling memories of his recent visit to Semipalatinsk, the former nuclear test site in Kazakhstan, were still fresh in his mind. Last April, after flying over Ground Zero and then standing less than two miles from the actual site of nuclear tests, he contemplated the effects of 450 bomb tests - - destroyed environment, children suffering from cancer and birth defects. But he also recalled that the test site had been subsequently closed, nuclear weapons banished by a newly independent Kazakhstan and the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia signed at that very spot. The former test site, he said, now stood "as a symbol of disarmament and hope for the future."

As the conference began the eighth round in the five-year review cycle of the NPT accord, the cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, such expressions of hope were more audible than back in 2005, when a similar exercise had ended in failure. Certainly, there was also no shortage of skeptics -- in the media and elsewhere -- who questioned the treaty's effectiveness, raised doubts about compliance and pointed to the resentments between the nuclear "haves" and "have-nots," to name just a few obstacles.

And yet, there was a clear sense that progress was possible. In arguing that case, many cited a series of recent developments: the signing of the new START agreement by the presidents of the Russia and the US; various initiatives by other governments; the holding of the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, with a planned follow-up in Seoul. Those steps are indeed encouraging, but will the momentum hold? This was the anxious question I kept asking myself as I listened to the official speeches -- some confrontational, many visionary and constructive -- in the General Assembly Hall, and then talked to people in the hallways and followed what was happening in a series of side events. What I saw and heard gave me hope that things were indeed moving in the right direction. And if there was one thing that I found particularly hopeful it was the involvement by those whose vital role is sometimes not fully recognized, the so-called civil society -- NGOs, leaders of towns and cities from around the world, community activists, prominent cultural figures.

There was Michael Douglas, for instance, who spoke movingly at the screening of a documentary, *Countdown to Zero*, and the opening of an exhibition, "Putting an End to Nuclear Explosion." Pointing to a chart that depicted the evolution of nuclear weapons, he recalled that he was born in 1944, just one year before the first nuclear explosion happened. His ardent hope: there should never be another one.

That hope was also very much on the minds of participants of another event with the group called "Mayors for Peace," which brings together city leaders from around the world. Among them was Mitsuaki Takami, archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Nagasaki, who came to the UN to urge world leaders to move toward the total abolition of nuclear weapons. He has good reasons: on Aug. 9, 1945, he was in his mother's womb when the second atomic bomb obliterated his hometown.

As participants of the NPT review conference toil behind closed doors to iron out their differences, they should try to keep in their sights a date only two months away from the scheduled conclusion of their forum. August 6 will mark another anniversary of the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. "Sixty five years later, the world still lives under the nuclear shadow," Mr. Ban Ki-moon reminded the delegates. In a first for a UN Secretary-General, he intends to be there this year to call for a world free of nuclear weapons. And as I stand there with him, I will not be afraid to say that it's a moment fraught with symbolism.