Remarks by Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller

2015 International Day against Nuclear Tests
High-Level Panel - Towards Zero: Resolving the Contradictions

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As Delivered

Thank you so much for the introduction, Ambassador Kawar. It is an honor to be on this podium with you, and thank you to your government for hosting the Integrated Field Exercise IFE14 in December 2014. I was able to attend as an observer, and Jordan’s work to host the event was impressive. Thanks also to the Kazakhstani Government and to Ambassador Kairat Abdrakhmanov for arranging this event. I am honored to be a part of this panel observing the 2015 International Day Against Nuclear Tests. I am always grateful for the opportunity to talk about this important subject.

Over 2,000 nuclear explosive tests have taken place around the world over the last 70 years, about a quarter of which were tested in the atmosphere. Over time, radioactive and cancer-causing particles such as Strontium-90 found their way into milk and other food products, eventually ending up in the bones of children. Radioactive “hotspots” popped up across the United States and around the globe.

Growing public concern about the dangers of nuclear explosive testing collided with a turning point in history – the Cuban Missile Crisis. As an initial step
leading us back from the brink of nuclear war, President John F. Kennedy called for a complete ban on nuclear explosive testing in 1963.

We were able to achieve part of this objective through the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) back in 1963 – banning tests in the water, in space and in the atmosphere. This tempered the problem of Strontium-90 in baby milk. But, at that time, we did not reach agreement on banning underground nuclear explosive testing, as we lacked the technology to accurately detect such tests. We didn’t give up in the face of this challenge. Through steady work and persistence, we developed the tools we would need to negotiate first a verifiable Threshold Test-Ban Treaty (TTBT), which entered into force in 1990, and then a Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Once it comes into force, the CTBT will allow us to complete the work we started 52 years ago: the world will have a legally binding global ban on nuclear explosions of any kind. In the meantime, it is important to remember that we have a superstructure already in place limiting testing: two legally binding treaties, the LTBT and the TTBT, remain in force, and since 1992, we have had an international moratorium on nuclear testing that with a few exceptions, has been remarkably effective.

Although the United States was the first to sign the CTBT in 1996, the Senate in 1999 failed to give its advice and consent to ratification. At that time, two main issues concerned the Senators: our ability to maintain the nuclear stockpile without explosive nuclear testing, and our ability to verify compliance with the Treaty.

Today the situation is entirely different.
Our science-based Stockpile Stewardship Program is ensuring that we do not need to conduct nuclear explosive tests in order to ensure the safety, security and effectiveness of our reduced nuclear arsenal, the nuclear weapons we still maintain. In fact, this month marks 23 years since the United States last conducted a nuclear explosive test. Today, the Department of Energy’s Stockpile Stewardship Program – a suite of experimental, diagnostic and supercomputing capabilities – allows us to model and simulate nuclear devices without nuclear explosive testing. In fact, we actually understand more about how nuclear weapons work now than we did during the period of nuclear explosive testing. Let me be clear, this stockpile stewardship work is important to implementing President Obama’s commitment in Prague to reduce nuclear weapons with the goal of totally eliminating them. At the same time, the President said that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States must maintain a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal. The arsenal is shrinking, but it must remain safe, secure and effective in the meantime.

The ability to monitor and verify compliance with the CTBT is also stronger than it has ever been. The International Monitoring System (IMS), the heart of the verification regime, was just a concept two decades ago. Today, it is a nearly complete, technically advanced, global network of sensors, including 35 stations in the United States, that can detect even relatively low-yield nuclear explosions.

My boss, Secretary of State John Kerry, has called the IMS one of the great accomplishments of the modern world. In addition to its verification role, the IMS has also proven its ability to contribute critical scientific data on earthquakes, tsunamis and radioactivity from nuclear reactor accidents.
The on-site inspection element of the CTBT verification regime has advanced significantly as well. Last December, I was fortunate enough to be an observer at the Integrated Field Exercise sponsored by the CTBT Organization and hosted by Jordan. Seeing first-hand the formidable technology and expertise the international community can bring together to investigate the site of a suspected nuclear explosion was nothing short of amazing.

Plain and simple, the CTBT is good for U.S. security and it is good for international security. It is a key part of leading nuclear weapons states toward a world of diminished reliance on nuclear weapons and reduced likelihood of nuclear arms races. Most critically, an in-force CTBT would constrain a regional arms race in Asia, where states are building up and modernizing nuclear forces.

All told, it is in our interest to close the door on nuclear explosive testing forever.

Despite the clear merits of the Treaty, it remains, as President Kennedy said 52 years ago, “so near and yet so far.” One of our biggest challenges is that it has been a long time since the CTBT was on the front pages of U.S. newspapers. Our first task is educating the public and Congress to build support for U.S. ratification.

As you all know, cutting through the day to day issues and getting people to focus on a treaty that many people already assume we have in place is no easy task. That’s why I am currently focusing on states most closely affected by explosive nuclear testing. They obviously include Nevada and New Mexico where testing took place, but also Utah, which is downwind from the former testing site in Nevada. There are also some lesser known testing locations such as Colorado,
Alaska and Mississippi. I’ll travel to each of these states to redevelop the kind of grassroots interest that we saw in advance of the LTBT. I’ll appreciate the support of the non-governmental community as we do so.

People need to know what this Treaty is and why it is important. The most important thing that supporters of the CTBT can do is to educate their friends, their families and their communities on the reasons that the Treaty is good for America.

Back in Washington, we are focused on an open dialogue, rather than a timeline, to re-familiarize Senators with the Treaty. Ratification of the CTBT will require debate, discussion, questions, briefings, trips to the National Labs and other technical facilities, hearings and more, as was the case with the New START Treaty. The Senators should have every opportunity to ask questions – many, many questions – until they are satisfied. That is how good policy is made and that is how treaties get across the finish line.

We are confident that we have a good case to make. As former Reagan-era Secretary of State George Shultz said, “Senators might have been right voting against the CTBT some years ago, but they would be right voting for it now.”

I don’t think it will be easy, but that doesn’t matter. An in-force CTBT will benefit the United States and indeed, the whole world. We will keep pushing.

With that I want to briefly touch on the title of this event, “Towards Zero: Resolving the Contradictions.” Frankly, I have to take exception with it: I think that framing is too defeatist. What contradictions? We know what we have to do
and we will do it. Yes, we have an enormous amount of work ahead of us, none of which lends itself to quick fixes. That does not mean we have failed or are bound to fail. To use a U.S. expression – it means we need to pull up our socks and try harder. That is the only way. If we give way to dispute over methods, we will get nowhere. Thank you, and I look forward to our discussion.