



Kazakhstan's Echo

A publication of the Embassy of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada
with views and comments on developments in and around Kazakhstan

www.kazakhembus.com

June 12, 2006

No. 26

Legacy of Nuclear Weapons Tests in Nevada and Kazakhstan: Lessons the World Must Never Forget

Representatives of Kazakhstan and Nevada, two places with the longest history of nuclear weapons testing, have called on the world to learn from the past and stop developing new nuclear weapons and follow Kazakhstan's example of voluntary disarmament as the right way to true peace and prosperity.

The calls were made at an international symposium, *Nuclear Weapons Testing in Nevada and Semipalatinsk: Shared Legacy, Shared Lessons*, which was held at the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas on June 1. The office of Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV), the Kazakhstan Embassy to the United States and the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation jointly arranged the symposium. Attended by delegations from Kazakhstan, the United States and Japan, the event was supported by Governor Kenny Guinn of Nevada who wrote that a legacy of nuclear weapons testing "continues to be an issue the world needs to know more about."

Rep. Berkley opened the symposium, noting the unfading importance of the world remembering the lessons of Nevada and Semipalatinsk and the growing partnership between the United States and Kazakhstan.

"Kazakhstan is a very important strategic partner for the United States. The Kazakhstan-United States relationship will continue to grow because of Kazakhstan's strategic location and our need of their oil and gas reserves. Our relations are a strategic partnership of equals which keeps growing," she said.

At right: Shared concerns

Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV) speaks to the symposium in Las Vegas on June 1 as Ambassador Kanat Saudabayev looks on.



Kanat Saudabayev, Kazakhstan's Ambassador to the United States, in his remarks to the symposium said, "It is fair to say that Kazakhstan's rejection of nuclear weapons was the courageous

and historic choice of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The world can and should follow Kazakhstan's example and engage in further reduction and elimination of nuclear arsenals and other weapons of mass destruction, prevent their further proliferation, not to mention preventing their acquisition by terrorists."

Most speakers noted that with time the gruesome consequences of nuclear weapons testing and the importance of Kazakhstan's contributions to global security tend to fade away in people's memories. What is more, today's challenges make it even more important to remind the world about what happened and take active steps towards preserving its memory and making certain that testing of nuclear weapons and their use never happen again.

Bob Mackenzie of the Atomic Marines told the symposium of his experience at Pacific test sites in what is today the Republic of the Marshall Islands. He said, "When we tell people about our experiences, we get blank stares from them as if they are in the 60s and are high on drugs. We need to remind people about what happened."

Mary Wilkinson of Downwinders United in Utah shared her personal story of fighting thyroid cancer and other disease and in her very emotional remarks said:

"Today we learned that more than 1.5 million people suffered from nuclear weapons testing in Kazakhstan, but we do not have such statistics in America, we do not know how many people got sick and how many have already died from radiation caused illnesses. But, we know for certain that radioactive clouds brought these illnesses across the continental United States and even Canada."

She continued: "A written word can be more powerful than the mightiest weapon, but an eraser can be more powerful than a pen. People are already forgetting about our common tragedy, and we need to continue to tell our story. We all have a moral responsibility to continue saving people and not allowing the resumption of nuclear weapons testing."

Corbin Harney, a spiritual leader of the Western Shoshone, a Native American tribe whose historic home in Nevada became a nuclear test site supported Wilkinson's call: "Let us join our efforts and stop this nonsense which is the development of nuclear weapons. Let us work together for we live in one world together. If we don't act now, what kind of Earth will we leave to future generations?"

From 1949 to 1991, the Soviet Union conducted 456 nuclear weapons tests at the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in eastern Kazakhstan, including 116 atmospheric tests. This led to the spread of different levels of radiation to more than 300,000 square kilometers (one tenth of Kazakhstan's territory), and caused an increase in cancers, cardiovascular diseases, leucosis and neurotic disorders in the Semipalatinsk region. According to statistics, in 1980, there were 158 cases of cancer per 100,000



Symposium participants pay close attention as speakers outline the history of nuclear weapons testing and call for a nuclear weapons free world.

people there; by 1990 the figure had grown by one third. The death rates from lung and esophageal cancers grew three and eight times in the same period. By 1988, the death rate among children there was 18 percent higher than Kazakhstan' average.

The United States conducted 928 atomic weapons tests at the Nevada Test Site from 1951 to 1992, in addition to another 100 or so tests conducted in the Pacific. Until the atmospheric test ban treaty went into effect in 1963, radiation from atmospheric tests in Nevada was blown across many states causing higher cancer rates in Nevada, Utah, Idaho and other U.S. states. Strontium-90 and Cesium-137, radioactive elements, were even found in cow's milk in Wisconsin, 1,600 miles from the Nevada Test Site. A 2002 study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta found that almost all Americans who were born after 1951 have been exposed to radioactive fallout.

Mary Palevsky, Director of the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas told of the work her program does to collect interviews with a wide range of people who were involved in nuclear weapons testing across the United States. The list includes politicians, scientists, diplomats, engineers and workers and military personnel from the test site, and victims of radiation exposure. The program is a four year effort funded by the federal government. If there is an interest in Kazakhstan and other countries, the program will be willing to expand its scope to include interviews with similar people in Kazakhstan, Palevsky offered.

Another suggestion voiced, and supported, at the symposium, was jointly conducting scientific studies of the effects of nuclear weapons testing both in the United States and Kazakhstan.

The symposium's most important result came in a statement of the participants calling on the world to "reject developing nuclear weapons, the modern Sword of Damocles that has imperiled humanity for too long, and to join together to rid the world of the threat of nuclear holocaust."

In the statement, symposium participants noted: "In 1991, the people of Kazakhstan under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev permanently shut down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site and took the courageous decision to voluntarily renounce the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal. Kazakhstan has so far remained the only country to make such a decisive and wise move which showed the way to a safer world."

The statement concluded: "We pledge to work together to strengthen international cooperation to achieve nonproliferation, as we recognize this is the only path we can take to make our planet safe for all nations to pursue a better future for their people."

"I am deeply convinced our calls for full renunciation of nuclear weapons will be heard in the world because we are talking about values shared by all the people on the planet. My country has already contributed to this process and continues along the path. The more countries that follow Kazakhstan's example, the safer and better our world will be," concluded Ambassador Saudabayev.

The symposium was covered by the news media, including Fox 5, CBS Eyewitness News, Telemundo, and the Las Vegas Sun.

Meanwhile in New York, an independent Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction led by Hans Blix, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, stressed many of the same concerns raised at the Nevada symposium in its June 1 report.

(The complete text of the symposium's final statement follows.)

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**Statement by the participants of the international symposium,
“Nuclear Weapons Testing in Nevada and Semipalatinsk:
SHARED LEGACY, SHARED LESSONS”**

Las Vegas, Nevada, June 1, 2006

On the occasion of the symposium, Nuclear Weapons Testing in Nevada and Semipalatinsk: SHARED LEGACY, SHARED LESSONS, we, the undersigned, express our concern over the continuous proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world, and therefore declare the following.

In the second part of the 20th Century, during the Cold War, the lands of Nevada and Kazakhstan became sites for nuclear weapons testing by the United States and the Soviet Union, and many of our citizens became victims of the radioactive fallout and other contaminants that resulted from the testing. These people tragically came to know the destructive force of weapons of mass destruction. As a result of 928 nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, along with more tests at other U.S. proving grounds, and 456 nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk Test Site, many thousands of innocent Americans and Kazakhs suffered. Many continue to this day to suffer the consequences of nuclear testing.

In 1991, the people of Kazakhstan under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev permanently shut down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site and took the courageous decision to voluntarily renounce the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal.

Kazakhstan has so far remained the only country to make such a decisive and wise move which showed the way to a safer world.

The United States, at the direction of both Democratic and Republican presidents, has maintained a moratorium on nuclear testing, has reduced its nuclear arsenal, and has aided in decommissioning nuclear weapons abroad.

Unfortunately, the age of nuclear weapons development has not ended. To the contrary, the specter of nuclear weapons is spreading.

Today, the aspirations of a number of countries, and of international terrorist organizations, to acquire nuclear weapons are becoming ever more threatening to the future of humankind. Against this background, we are grateful to Kazakhstan for its outstanding contribution to global security. Kazakhstan's leadership and its successful cooperation with the United States to advance the cause of nonproliferation should serve as an example for other countries.

The victims of nuclear testing in Nevada and Semipalatinsk are eternal reminders to the nations of the world to reject developing nuclear weapons, the modern Sword of Damocles that has imperiled humanity for too long, and to join together to rid the world of the threat of nuclear holocaust.

We are most pleased to report that today's Symposium in Las Vegas, Nevada is another step toward further empowering the people of the United States and Kazakhstan to lead all people away from the threat of nuclear weapons, and redress the consequences of earlier nuclear testing. We pledge to work together to strengthen international cooperation to achieve nonproliferation, as we recognize this is the only path we can take to make our planet safe for all nations to pursue a better future for their people.

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