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Kazakhstan – A convincing state in the struggle for a world free of nuclear weapons. (The Hague, 30th August 2011).

Interview with Sverre Lodgaard, Senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

We are here at the Peace Palace in The Hague, invited by the Embassy of Kazakhstan to learn more about nuclear dilemmas.

When the UN Secretary General visited the former Soviet nuclear testing site at Semipalatinsk, today's Semey in Kazakhstan, he said that the world should follow the Kazakh example. What did he mean by that?

Kazakhstan is a great advocate for disarmament and non-proliferation. The former test site at Semipalatinsk is closed and the last Soviet nuclear weapons are gone since 1995. Today Kazakhstan is a member of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Asia - it was a Kazakh initiative. The country is also a candidate to host the new international fuel bank.

What is a nuclear fuel bank?

The idea is that a country prone to having its own nuclear energy industry does not need its own facilities to enrich uranium. The international fuel bank will be the supplier of uranium. The country simply could buy from the bank. The proliferation of national enrichment complexes will enable many countries to produce their own weapons grade materials. This should be avoided because an enrichment facility can be used for the production of low-enriched uranium and highly enriched uranium as well.

Which location in Kazakhstan will be a potential site for the nuclear fuel bank? I am aware of discussions about placing the bank near the former Semipalatinsk test site?

I know that the decision which county will actually be in charge of the fuel bank will be made soon. I do not know about the actual location. It makes sense to consider the Ulba Metallurgical Plant (UMP) in Ust-Kamenogorsk, eastwards from Semipalatinsk.

How about environmental considerations and the risks of transporting nuclear materials?

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission runs an office of nuclear material safety and safeguards. Their criteria will apply. I really do not see this as the biggest problem.



Protesters. Photo: Yuri Kuidin

In 2010 the UN General Assembly adopted unanimously the 'International day against nuclear testing'. – The 29th of August was chosen: the day when the nuclear testing site was closed in 1991. Ending nuclear testing was also an initiative by the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazabayev. Who is conducting nuclear tests today?

Nobody. The five Nuclear weapons states (NWS) committed themselves to a moratorium. Pakistan and India also agreed not to test – but together with the US and China both did not ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which forbids nuclear tests of any yield.

A verification system is in place which can globally detect nuclear explosions; in other words nobody can conduct clandestine nuclear bomb tests.

How about Kazakhstan's engagement in this field?

The main battle about ratification takes place in the US. If the United States will ratify the treaty China will follow suit. In this case both India and Pakistan will come under

strong pressure to do the same.

Kazakhstan has a border with Iran through the Caspian Sea. What could Kazakhstan do in order to reduce the tensions between Iran and other nations on the nuclear energy issue?

It is important to engage Iran. Sanctions did not work. The ‘Arabic spring’ opens up for closer relationships between Iran and Egypt. Kazakhstan can offer an opening towards the North.

Nuclear weapon states are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. At the same time President Obama is calling for a world free of nuclear weapons and is praising Kazakhstan for its commitment to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction. What is it all about?

This is the well-known old story of the cold war. In order to bring the nuclear weapon industry on board about arms control and reductions they have to be compensated somehow. President Obama enlarged for instance the budget of the nuclear laboratories to reduce the resistance to ratifying the CTBT.

Without nuclear weapon states really disarming, non-proliferation is doomed to fail. What are the prospects for Obama’s ambitions towards a nuclear weapons-free world?

Several attempts have been made before. The Baruch plan from 1946 was washed away by the cold war. The McCloy-Zorin agreement from the 1960’s never got to grips with reality. The meeting at Reykjavik between Reagan and Gorbachev resulted in several agreements, yet the great vision failed. Today many states are leaning back and waiting to see how things evolve. If the US and Russia are not coming to terms with new and big cuts in their nuclear arsenals we will not be successful this time either.

The former concentration camp Auschwitz is on the UNESCO world heritage list. Could this status not also be given to the former Soviet nuclear testing site at Semey/Semipalatinsk?

Not the same status. If the area will be utilized for the peaceful use of nuclear energy will its symbolic value – from destructive to peace prone use – be impressive.

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