The Enduring Legacy of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement

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It's a tremendous pleasure and a great honor for me to be reunited today with my old friends Olzhas Suleimenov and Karipbek Kuyukov. I'd like to thank the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan and PNND for making this possible.

Twenty-five years ago, on October 15 and 16, 1991, less than two months after the historic closure of the Polygon I was part of the first international NGO delegation to tour the Semipalatinsk test site. It is an experience I will never forget.

My first visit to Kazakhstan was in 1990, when I took part in the International Citizens Congress for a Nuclear Test Ban in Almaty. It was an experience that changed my life. It changed my life because it changed my understanding of the world and my role in it.

In 1990, Kazakhstan was still part of the Soviet Union, locked in a perilous Cold War with the United States. As a U.S. citizen, I grew up during the Cold War in a climate of fear and suspicion of the Soviet Union. As a young adult in the early 1980's I lived in fear of nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and I was part of a large, active anti-nuclear peace movement in the United States.

My activism took me to the Nevada Test Site, where the United States was regularly conducting nuclear weapons test explosions on land stolen from the indigenous people of the Western Shoshone nation. Radiation from the nuclear tests was causing serious birth defects, cancers and other diseases in downwind populations. In the late 1980s I took part in nonviolent protests at the Nevada Test Site involving as many as 7,000 people. Yet, the major U.S. media did not report on our demonstrations, most Americans were unaware of them, and we anti-nuclear protesters felt marginalized.

It would have been inconceivable for me to imagine that halfway around the world, in the Soviet Union, under communism, a massive, mainstream, militant anti-nuclear movement was growing. But in 1989 I was among a group that met a young Kazakh named Kairat Umarov who was visiting San Francisco. He told us an amazing story, about how earlier that year, a leading poet and member of the Duma, Olzhas Suleimenov, had gone on local television to announce that there had been a leak from an underground nuclear test at Semipalatinsk. He called for a mass protest meeting, and the next day, over 5000 people showed up at the Writers Union Hall in Almaty. Somehow, they had heard about our big demonstrations at the Nevada Test Site, and they named themselves the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement. Kairat also told us that 10,000 copper miners had gone on strike in a protest against Soviet nuclear tests at Semipalatinsk. We couldn't believe our ears! (By the way, Kairat Umarov is now the Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the United States.)

When I learned that International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, in partnership with the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, was planning an international conference in 1990, I had to go. But nothing could have prepared me for the experience. I barely knew where Kazakhstan was.

When our plane landed at Alma Ata, as it was called then, the air field was filled with hundreds of welcoming Kazakhs in traditional clothing, carrying trays of bread and holding signs that read: “Let the Generals Build Their Summer Homes at the Nuclear Test Sites.” A huge billboard was mounted on the wall of the airport with the logo of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, a Western Shoshone elder passing a peace pipe to a Kazakh elder. At that moment I realized that I was part of the global majority - and not a marginalized minority. The 1990 conference, which took place in the pre-internet age, ultimately laid the groundwork for today’s global anti-nuclear movements and underscored the importance of cross-fertilization and collaboration among civil society groups, mayors, parliamentarians and national governments – a concept on full display here today, 25 years later.

When the Polygon was officially closed in 1991, it was a tremendous source of inspiration to anti-nuclear efforts around the world. The success of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement proved that a powerful, committed, well-organized grassroots movement could accomplish miracles. That lesson is more important today than ever, as – unfortunately – nuclear dangers are growing again. Our work is far from over.

More than 15,000 nuclear weapons, most orders of magnitude more powerful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, and most held by the U.S. and Russia, continue to pose an intolerable threat to humanity, and the dangers of wars among nuclear-armed states are growing.

Since before the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has demonstrated bold and courageous leadership in nuclear disarmament. But unfortunately, Kazakhstan is caught up in the contradiction that has plagued the world from the beginning of the nuclear age. I’m referring to its commitment to so-called “peaceful” nuclear uses.

The materials and technology needed to produce nuclear energy can be used to make nuclear weapons. It is regrettable that Kazakhstan prides itself on being the world’s largest uranium producer and that it has recently become the official international fuel bank, to supply low enriched uranium to nuclear power producers in other countries. With the terrible suffering the people of Kazakhstan have endured as a result of nuclear weapons testing, it saddens me that the uranium miners and fuel bank workers in Kazakhstan are being exposed to the same radioactive poison that has ravaged the population.

Ultimately, I believe, for a peaceful and sustainable future, the world must rid itself of both nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.

In 1990, Olzhas Suleimenov captured in one phrase the work ahead of us, when he said: “It’s time to reject the dictates of the Roman Empire: If you want peace, prepare for war. Instead, we say, if you want peace prepare for peace.” As we celebrate the enduring success of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, let us rededicate ourselves to this noble task.