

Defusing the nuclear powder keg

How Asian nations can lead by example

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Former UN Under-Secretary General for Disarmament Affairs, Jayantha Dhanapala praises Indonesia's ratification of the CTBT and argues that each additional ratification sends a clear political message to the remaining hold-out States.

If our cricket-crazy South Asian subcontinent knows the Sri Lankan hill-country town of Pallekelle — in the suburbs of my hometown of Kandy — for anything, it is for the Pallekelle International Cricket Stadium where some of the 2011 World Cup Cricket matches were played.

However, Pallekelle is also home to another, more inconspicuous but no less important complex: a monitoring station to detect nuclear explosions. It is a part of an unprecedented global alarm system built by the Vienna-based Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

SENSORS ACROSS THE WORLD

Monitoring technologies have evolved far beyond what was envisaged at the time of the system's conception in the 1990s. When complete, over 300 state-of-the-art sensors in every corner of the world will listen to the atmosphere, the oceans and underground for shock waves from a

nuclear blast. Radionuclide stations sniff the air for radioactivity — the 'smoking gun' of any nuclear test. Thanks to the most elaborate verification system in the history of arms control, of which 290 facilities are now operational, the international community can rest assured that all nuclear tests of military significance will be detected, as indicated in the March 2012 National Academy of Sciences report on *The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT): Technical Issues for the United States*. The system has already proved its effectiveness by detecting the North Korean tests in 2006 and 2009, despite their low yield and the fact that considerably fewer monitoring stations were operational then.

THE 'DOOMSDAY CLOCK' - ONE MINUTE CLOSER TO MIDNIGHT

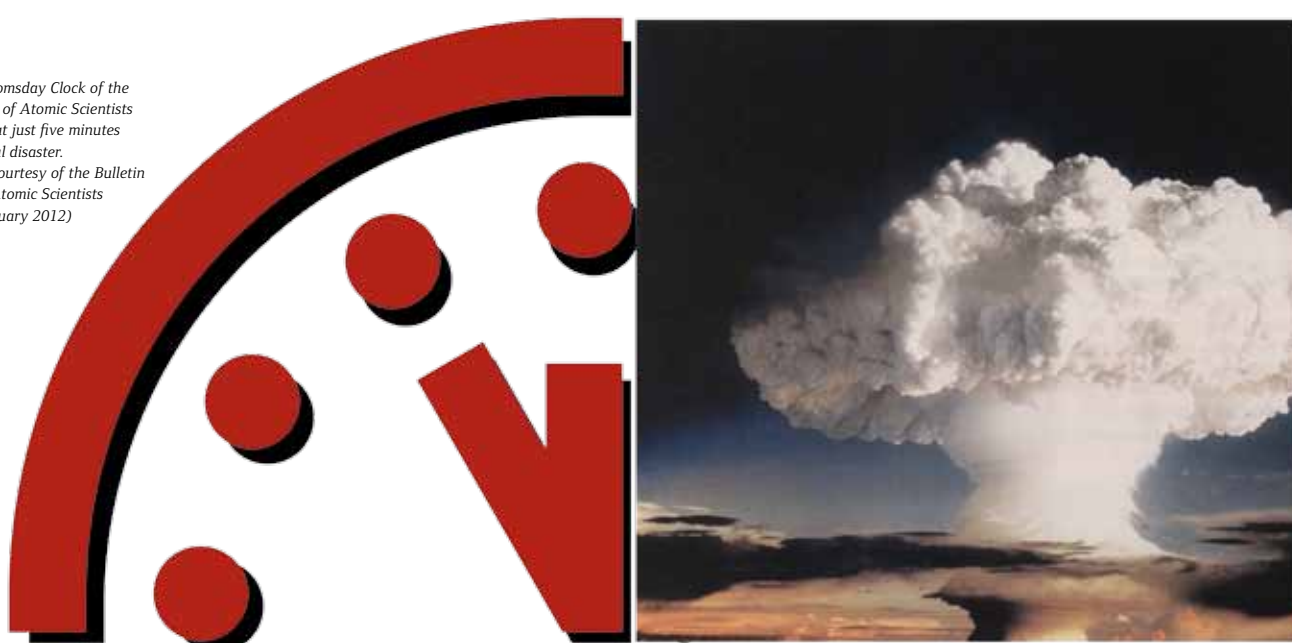
Although the CTBTO is celebrating its 15th birthday this year and has come a



»Opposing the CTBT because it fails to deliver complete disarmament is tantamount to opposing speed limits on roads because they fail to prevent accidents completely.«

long way in establishing its formidable verification system, the CTBT has yet to become global law. This is one of the main reasons why, in my presence on January 10 in Washington D.C. this year, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists decided to adjust the hands of its 'Doomsday Clock' — a symbolic measure which counts down to nuclear Armageddon — one minute closer to midnight: it is now set at 11:55, five minutes before global disaster.

The Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists stands at just five minutes to global disaster. Photo courtesy of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (10 January 2012)



Veteran Nepalese diplomat Hira B. Thapa recently wrote about the looming danger of nuclear warfare in South Asia for his country. I share the same fears for Sri Lanka. The detonation, accidental or planned, of even a single nuclear weapon in this part of the world, would be catastrophic for the region. A nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan would cause a global nuclear winter leading to years of widespread famine, as Professors Alan Robock from Rutgers University and Owen Brian Toon from the University of Colorado, United States, have predicted. Nuclear war in South Asia can be triggered by States or non-State actors, by accident or design – as long as nuclear weapons exist in the region.

HAMPERING QUALITATIVE IMPROVEMENTS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

A crude Hiroshima-bomb type weapon can be developed without testing, yet the development of more advanced nuclear weapons continues to rely on testing.

The CTBT was never meant to be a cure-all. It addresses one, albeit crucial aspect: hampering qualitative improvements of nuclear weapons. It could make a difference – whether a 'simple' nuclear weapon is at stake or a thermonuclear weapon with apocalyptic destructive power.

Only eight specific ratifications are missing for the CTBT to enter into force: the United States, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, and North Korea.

In February 2012, Indonesia decided to leave this group and join the 156 countries that had already ratified the CTBT, while the Obama Administration has pledged to resubmit the Treaty to the US Senate for advice and consent.

Since its inception in 1996, the CTBT's zero-testing norm is the expression of a zero-tolerance stance against nuclear testing, treated nowadays as a reckless and atavistic display of nuclear weapon possession. It is my hope that other countries in the wider Asian region will follow Indonesia's shining example.

ON PEACE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The non-nuclear weapon States in our region could make a difference by leading through example: among the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), only Brunei, Myanmar and Thailand have yet to ratify the CTBT. The ASEAN countries are also members of the South-East Asia Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (Treaty of Bangkok), which itself prohibits nuclear tests. Full regional membership of the Treaty of Bangkok and the CTBT are important steps in establishing South-East Asia as a nuclear weapon-free bastion of stability. In the wider region, the only countries that have yet to ratify the CTBT are Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Nepal, and my own country, Sri Lanka. Taking this decisive step would put the nuclear weapon possessors and the remaining eight CTBT hold-outs in the spotlight.

All these countries are parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as non-nuclear weapon States and active members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). For NAM, nuclear disarmament has been a core value since its inception in 1961. Over the decades it has pushed incessantly, and vigorously, for a global ban on nuclear weapons and nuclear tests alike and has supported the CTBT.

Ratifying the CTBT is not only a matter of principle. It is not only about supporting world peace and the environment. It is in our security interests. Indonesia has shown the way — now it is up to other countries to follow suit. Each additional ratification sends a clear political signal to the remaining hold-out States. The saga for the banning of all nuclear tests began in 1954 with a great visionary leader from Asia — Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. It would be a tragic irony for Asian nations to be an obstacle now when that goal is within sight.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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is a former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs (1998-2003) and a former Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the USA (1995-7) and to the UN Office in Geneva (1984-87). He is currently the 11th President of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, Deputy Chairman of the Governing Board of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and a member of several other advisory boards of international bodies.

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