



On 50th anniversary of Soviet atomic test, time to reassess nuclear weapons

Fifty years ago, the Soviet Union exploded its first atom bomb and became the second state to begin raining fallout on its own people, and others, in the name of national security. Near the test site in Kazakhstan, in the village of Dolon, the deadly radioactive seeds of cancers, birth defects, nervous system disorders, and immunological deficiencies began to be sown. Like the United States, the Soviet Union did most of its nuclear testing in areas belonging to indigenous and minority peoples.

President Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki provoked the Soviet decision to build nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible. In turn, the Aug. 29, 1949, Soviet test triggered a panic in the United States and led to its decision to build hydrogen bombs.

The fallout created by the subsequent frenzy of atmospheric testing is projected to cause an estimated 100,000 to half-a-million cancer fatalities by the end of the next century. And the radiation doses will go on long after that because some radionuclides, such as plutonium-239 and carbon-14, have half-lives of thousands of years.

The Soviet and U.S. nuclear-weapons establishments were aware of the dangers. But they did not warn, much less protect, their populations. The United States, however, did give advance notice of its nuclear tests to the photographic film industry, so that Kodak and others could protect their film from fallout damage.

The damage did not stop when the United States and the Soviet Union ended atmospheric testing in 1963. Underground testing has left a radioactive mess containing millions of curies of long-lived radioactive materials at scores of test sites.

Nuclear tests, and the development of nuclear weapons that they have enabled, have produced a chain reaction of pollution and proliferation, resulting in new weapons in existing nuclear states as well as new nuclear powers. The process continues to this day despite the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which the United States, Russia and China have signed but not ratified.

For instance, the United States and Russia are carrying out "sub-critical" tests that supposedly do not involve nuclear explosions but still use plutonium and disperse it underground.

The United States and France are building billion-dollar machines to create small thermonuclear explosions using lasers in a laboratory setting. They claim, without technical merit, that such explosions are exempt from the ban on nuclear explosions mandated by the CTBT, even though it categorically bans all nuclear explosions for any purpose whatsoever.

The determination of the nuclear weapons states to maintain and develop their arsenals was a significant factor in India's nationalistic decision in 1998 to test nuclear weapons. The institutionalized inequality between the five countries that tested before the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed (in 1968) and the rest of the world is often derisively referred to as "nuclear apartheid" in India. Pakistan's tests were in turn, a reaction to India's tests.



Because of the nuclear-arms race, the world still sits at the edge of the abyss of all-out nuclear war. Further, Soviet and US nuclear weapons production and testing have resulted in vast areas of contamination and much sickness and disease. Neither country has shown a serious budgetary commitment to helping the people whom the process has hurt. The U.S. budget for nuclear testing and design today is larger than the average for such expenditures during the Cold War. Indeed, it is about as large as the entire Russian military budget.

Nothing better epitomizes the bankruptcy of the argument that nuclear weapons have provided security than the fact that all nuclear-weapons states have harmed their own people without their informed consent in the process of producing and testing nuclear weapons.

On this 50th anniversary of the first Soviet test, the United States and Russia should ratify the CTBT, stop developing new weapons, and turn their attention and money to helping those they have injured during the five-decade folly of the nuclear-arms race.