

COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN TREATY

The conclusion of a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has been a priority for the international community since the 1960s. The UN General Assembly has adopted resolutions calling for a CTBT since 1958. Recent international commitments to the CTBT were made at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review and Extension Conference in May 1995 and by a consensus resolution at the UN's 50th General Assembly (UNGA Res A 50/65) in which it was agreed to conclude a CTBT so as to enable its "signature by the outset of the 51st session of the General Assembly" (which began on September 17, 1996).

For the past two and a half years, intensive negotiations took place at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva. When India and Iran blocked consensus at the CD, a group of countries, led by Australia and including Canada, quickly rallied to take the treaty directly from the CD to the UNGA.

On Tuesday September 10, 1996, the resumed session of the UN's 50th General Assembly passed a resolution adopting the text of the CTBT, with 158 countries voting in favour, 3 countries voting against, and 5 countries abstaining. The treaty was opened for signature on September 24, 1996, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs signed on behalf of Canada.

While not entirely satisfied with every aspect of the current text, the vast majority of negotiating countries believe that it represents the best achievable outcome and that it meets an essential objective: an end to nuclear test explosions for all time. The treaty will impose, for the first time, constraints on the qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons. It represents the fulfilment of the first critical step in the program of action on non-proliferation and disarmament as agreed at the NPT Review and Extension Conference in 1995.

To enter into force, the treaty requires the signature and ratification of the 44 countries listed in the treaty text (including India and Pakistan which have announced that they will not sign). However, even if it does not enter into force for some time, it places an obligation on its signatories not to do anything which could "defeat the object of the treaty", i.e. an obligation not to conduct any nuclear test. In addition, Canada put forward an idea, now part of the treaty, to hold a "positive conference" three years after the treaty has been opened for signature. At that time, participating nations will take stock of the status of the treaty and seek ways by which the treaty could enter into force.