A time for superpowers to halt the trend to nuclear 'overkill'

By George Ignatieff

Nuclear testing — what is the fuss all about? In order to understand the case against continued testing of nuclear weapons and why Canada has taken a leading part in trying to bring about international agreements to constrain and end such tests, it is necessary to cast an eye back to the salient aspects of the history of this issue, which is so much in the news today, and then to look more closely at the present deadlock.

The problem of verification bedevilled efforts to achieve a comprehensive test ban (CTB) from the start in the discussions among the United States, the U.S.S.R. and Britain in the Geneva Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Tests, which lasted from 1958 to 1962; in its successor body, the subcommittee of the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC), consisting of the same three nuclear powers, which was set up in March 1962, and lasted until December of that year; and in the ENDC itself between February and July 1963.

The United States consistently insisted upon the need for a number of obligatory on-site inspections to resolve doubts about ambiguous seismic events where seismological facilities and data-analysis could not discriminate between underground nuclear explosions and natural earthquakes. In the 1960s it was believed that the number of such doubtful cases might be quite large. The number of annual inspections suggested by the United States ranged from 21 to 12, which was subsequently revised downwards to from ten to eight and conditionally to seven. On the other hand, the U.S.S.R. professed, in the period 1960-63, a willingness in principle to accept a quota of from two to three on-site inspections a year.

Unfortunately, instead of being narrowed through negotiations, this on-site inspection gap remained just as wide when in 1963 the U.S.S.R. in effect refused to discuss the question of on-site inspections any further. It has subsequently adhered to the argument that site inspections constitute a form of acceptable intrusion and that they unnecessary, since non-intrusive seis logical means (what the U.S.S.R. usu calls "national means") are entirely a quate to monitor an underground tes Consequently, efforts to achieve an ag ment prohibiting testing in all envir ments foundered and the best that co be achieved was the Partial Test (PTB) Treaty banning testing in the mosphere, in outer space and under wa that was signed in Moscow on Augus 1963, by the United States, Britain the U.S.S.R. (A comprehensive reg prohibiting testing in all environme might be achieved either by a new c prehensive test ban (CTB) that subsu the Moscow Partial Test Ban (P Treaty of 1963 or by supplementing PTB with an underground test ban ag ment. For the purposes of this article, terms "CTB" and "underground test ba are used interchangeably.)

Unfortunately, the PTB is partial only because the scope of its prohibiti is limited primarily to three environme it is partial also because France and People's Republic of China have neve hered to it. Both continue to test nu explosive devices in the atmosphere i face of international disapproval and spite the hazards of radioactive fall which others have to suffer as a resu

Basic obligations

In addition to the prohibition on te in the atmosphere, outer space and i seas, the PTB does contain, however tain basic obligations of great impor with regard to underground testing. Fi in the preamble the three original pa declare their object to be that of "se to achieve the discontinuance of all explosions of nuclear weapons for all ti and their determination "to continue gotiations to this end", and Article I iterates that they "seek to achieve" conclusion of a CTB. Secondly, Artic