

THE 1974 THRESHOLD TEST BAN TREATY

Talks on a comprehensive test ban resumed after entry into force of the PTBT, but the focus on technical matters precluded systematic discussion of the provisions of a new agreement. The UN General Assembly adopted resolutions deploring or condemning nuclear tests and calling for their complete cessation, but the difficulties encountered gave rise to proposals for a partial approach to a ban on underground nuclear weapon testing. Appeals were made by non-nuclear weapon states for transitional measures of restraint that would suspend testing, or limit or reduce the size and number of tests, pending the entry into force of a comprehensive ban. For a long time, these proposals and appeals were ignored by the main testing powers, the USA and the USSR, until, in the summer of 1974, both countries changed their positions. On 3 July of that year they signed a bilateral treaty on the limitation of underground nuclear weapon tests, which came to be called the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT).

The scope of the obligations under the TTBT is very limited. The United States and the Soviet Union undertook to "prohibit, to prevent and not to carry out" any underground nuclear weapon test having a yield which exceeds 150 kt beginning on 31 March 1976. The official justification for setting a distant date for the entry into force of the yield limitation was that considerable time would be needed to make all verification arrangements. A more important reason, however, was that some warheads then under development were planned to have a yield exceeding the agreed limit. Testing, therefore, had to take place before the restrictions became effective. Tests with yields exceeding the threshold were in fact hastily conducted by both the USA and the USSR after the signature of the TTBT and before it was to enter into effect. Although the parties committed themselves to restrict the number of tests to a minimum, neither US nor Soviet testing activities slackened.

Ratification of the TTBT has not taken place because of opposition in the USA to making it formally and legally binding. The