

No. 58/3

EXCHANGE OF CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN
MR. N. KHRUSHCHEV, CHAIRMAN OF THE
COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF THE U.S.S.R.,
AND PRIME MINISTER JOHN G. DIEFENBAKER.
(LETTERS OF APRIL 4 AND MAY 9, 1958)

Moscow
April 14, 1958.

Dear Prime Minister:

One of the most urgent questions of the international relations of our day and one which causes an especially profound concern to millions of people in all countries throughout the world is the need for the immediate cessation of tests of atomic and hydrogen weapons of various kinds. It is not difficult to understand the deep anxiety which the continuation of experimental explosions of nuclear weapons arouses among all the strata of population, from political figures, experts and scientists to simple folk, ordinary workers of cities and villages, and mothers of families. It is these tests which accelerate the arms race, which facilitate the development of new destructive and lethal kinds of nuclear weapons, and which thus increase all the more the threat of an atomic war which hangs over mankind.

Moreover, even now, in time of peace, systematic experimental explosions of atomic and hydrogen weapons cause harm to the health of peaceful, unsuspecting, innocent people of different countries. In the petition signed by 9,235 scientists of 44 countries and submitted in January 1958 to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, it states that each test explosion of a nuclear bomb increases the radioactive fall-out, thus causing harm to the health of people all over the world and jeopardizing the normal development of future generations.

Taking all this into account the Soviet Government has come to the conclusion that it is not possible to delay the solution of the problem of ending nuclear weapon tests any longer since irreparable damage to the health of the people cannot be permitted.

As of today only three powers--the U.S.S.R., the United States and Great Britain--possess nuclear weapons and it would therefore be comparatively easy to reach an agreement for ending nuclear weapon tests. Unless tests are ended now other countries can come in time to possess nuclear weapons and in such circumstances it will, of course, be more difficult to reach an agreement on the cessation of tests.

For the past three years the Soviet Government have repeatedly approached the Governments of the United States and Great Britain with the proposal to end atomic and hydrogen weapon tests. Since the Government of the United States as well as the Government of Great Britain did not wish to agree to the cessation of nuclear tests without a time-limit, the Soviet side put forward a proposal, as a beginning, to stop these test at least for a limited period, for instance two to three years. The proposals of the U.S.S.R. on this question provide for the establishment of necessary international control over the cessation of tests.

In spite of all this an agreement to solve the question of the unconditional and immediate cessation or even of the temporary suspension of nuclear tests had unfortunately not yet been reached.

Motivated by a desire to make a practical start in the cessation everywhere of atomic and hydrogen weapon tests and thus to take the first step toward the complete liberation of mankind from the threat of an atomic war of annihilation, the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has resolved to stop the testing of all types of atomic and hydrogen weapons in the Soviet Union.

Implementing this resolution of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., the Soviet Government has decided unilaterally to stop the testing of all types of atomic and hydrogen weapons from March 31, 1958.

The Soviet Government has approached the Governments of the United States and Great Britain with a proposal to join in this measure. The Soviet Government calls upon the Government of Canada to support this initiative in the common interest of all mankind.

If the governments of the countries that now possess nuclear weapons support this proposal of the U.S.S.R. and take, in their turn, a decision to stop further tests, then the question which causes profound concern to the peoples of the whole world will at last find its solution, and thus a great step will be made towards establishing genuine confidence between states and consolidating peace.

However, if the governments of the countries that are in possession of nuclear weapons do not wish to respond to this decision of the Soviet Government, preferring to leave everything as before, and continue experiments with atomic and hydrogen weapons, then the Soviet Union will, of course, have no other alternative, in the interests of ensuring its security, than to consider itself free of the obligations which it has assumed with regard to the cessation of nuclear tests. The Soviet Government would not like the matter to take this course.

Hope is expressed in the appeal of the Soviet Government to the Governments of the United States and Great Britain that these Governments will join in the initiative of the Soviet Union and thus make possible everywhere and forever the cessation of nuclear weapons tests.

This first practical step toward the protection of people from the calamities with which they are threatened by the modern nuclear weapon will immensely facilitate progress toward the solution of the task--the complete deliverance of the peoples from the threat of an atomic war. One will hardly deny that the cessation of experiments with atomic and hydrogen weapons will without doubt greatly improve the entire international political atmosphere, and will create more favourable conditions for settling other outstanding international problems.

Allow me, Mr. Prime Minister, to express the hope that the above-mentioned proposals of the Soviet Government will meet with a positive reaction on the part of the Government of Canada.

With sincere respect,

N. KHRUSHCHEV

OTTAWA, Ontario
May 9, 1958.

When I first learned of your Government's announcement regarding nuclear tests, I ventured to hope that this step would lead to a disposition to move towards agreement on other disarmament problems. It has, therefore, been all the more disappointing and disturbing to me to observe the attitude which your Government has adopted in the recent Security Council discussions. Personally, I am at a loss to reconcile the Soviet attitude and argument in these meetings with the conciliatory tone of your message to me.

Dear Mr. Chairman,

I have given careful study to your letter of April 4. I can assure you that the subject matter - the question of nuclear weapons testing - is of grave concern to the Canadian Government. It is in this spirit that I reply to your message.

You will, I know, be aware of the public statements already made by the Government of Canada since your Government announced its decision, subject to certain reservations, to stop the testing of atomic and hydrogen weapons. You may have observed that the Canadian reaction to this announcement has been cautious and that a sense of uneasiness has modified the satisfaction we were tempted at first to entertain.

Shortly before your letter was delivered, the Canadian Government issued a statement explaining our reservations about a unilateral gesture of this kind following on intensive series of Soviet nuclear tests. We considered that while the suspension of the Soviet nuclear testing programme was to be welcomed in the context of the radiation hazard, it justified no more than the faintest hope that progress on disarmament was at last near at hand. For it is axiomatic that disarmament, to be significant in these times, must be the product of negotiation and agreement among nations. The world can hardly be expected to repose confidence in the potential results of a decision which could be reversed overnight and without consultation, by your Government.

It is because of the compelling need to erect, at whatever cost, some tangible and reliable foundation of mutual trust that I feel justified in asking you to clarify your position with regard to the establishment of an international system for the verification of nuclear tests. Assuming that you are willing to exchange views on this problem with other governments, I should be interested to know what type of practical measures you have in mind to ensure that tests of nuclear weapons were not being conducted anywhere in the world. I should further like to know whether you are prepared to negotiate seriously on this issue in the immediate future through the United Nations or diplomatic channels, or whether you insist on delaying discussions on these matters until a summit meeting has been arranged.

These questions spring from a conviction that governments, whether or not they dispose of nuclear weapons, have a right, indeed a duty, to work unceasingly for peace now, for the alternative is the possible obliteration of the human race. This is a matter of such profound significance to mankind that unilateral and conditional decisions to suspend the testing of nuclear arms are not a tolerable substitute for international agreement.

When I first learned of your Government's announcement regarding nuclear tests, I ventured to hope that this step heralded a genuine disposition to move towards agreement on other aspects of the disarmament problem. It has, therefore, been all the more disappointing and disturbing to me to observe the attitude which your government has adopted in the recent Security Council discussions. Personally, I am at a loss to reconcile the Soviet attitude and argument in these meeting with the conciliatory tone of your message to me.

Canadians have noted with concern the unjust accusations which your Government suddenly levelled against the United States in the Security Council on April 21, at a time when preliminary negotiations towards a summit conference were on the point of beginning in Moscow. I must also tell you frankly that the people of Canada have watched incredulously the negative reaction of the Soviet Union to the proposals advanced on April 29 by the United States for the prevention of surprise attack in the Arctic regions. This is the very area regarding which we as Canadians are especially concerned, and which we have repeatedly offered to open to international scrutiny.

If you are really anxious about developments in the Arctic and if you wish to eliminate the possibility of surprise attack across the polar regions, I find it hard to understand why you should cast aside a proposal designed to increase mutual security in that area. Let me repeat here, Mr. Chairman, that we stand by our offer to make available for international inspection or control any part of our territory, in exchange for a comparable concession on your part. I would hope that you would accept some arrangement along these lines not only as an indication of our good faith, but as part of a first, experimental step in building a system of international safeguards against surprise attack. When there is, by your own admission, a danger of nuclear war breaking out by accident or miscalculation, it is difficult for Canadians to comprehend your refusal to engage even in technical discussions intended to explore the feasibility of an international system of control.

As you know, the Canadian Government has not been opposed to a summit meeting for which adequate preparation has been made in advance. You have yourself stressed the need for preparation, and I am sure that you would agree with me that considerable preliminary work will be required before satisfactory arrangements for a summit meeting can be completed. What I find difficult to understand and to justify is your view, if I have interpreted it correctly, that no progress can be made on such important and complicated questions as the control of nuclear tests and the prevention of surprise attack until the time for a summit meeting arrives.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN G. DIEFENBAKER

