

# International day for the total elimination of the nuclear weapons

26 September, New York, USA

## Speech at the UN General Assembly plenary by Marzhan Nurzhan\*

Honorable Mr President of the GA, distinguished heads of delegations and your Excellences, Dear friends,

It is an honor for me to speak as a young person from Kazakhstan, convener of Abolition 2000 Youth and nuclear disarmament working group and coordinator of Parliamentarians for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament for CIS States, which includes Russia and most of the former Soviet countries.

My passion for nuclear disarmament arises from the nuclear legacy of Kazakhstan.

When my country became independent in 1991, we inherited 1500 nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union. At that time, we had the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest nuclear arsenal in the world. We could have joined the nuclear club. However, we decided to reject these weapons because we had experienced the human and environmental catastrophe caused by their use.

From 1949 until 1989 the Soviet Union conducted 456 nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site in Kazakhstan. These included 116 atmospheric tests and 340 in underground, that in turn were roughly equal to the capacity of 2500 Hiroshima atomic bombs. The nuclear explosions contaminated the Semey region, causing death, birth deformities, cancer or other severe health problems to almost 2 million people. Indeed, the impact of the nuclear tests on human health continues long after the last nuclear test, and will continue to for many generations to come.

This experience led to the Nevada -Semipalatinsk movement which motivated Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev to close the nuclear test site, and has also stimulated President Nazarbayev and the government of Kazakhstan to renounce nuclear weapons, lead the negotiations for a Central Asian nuclear weapon free zone, establish the ATOM project to educate the world about the impact of nuclear weapons, and propose an agenda for eliminating nuclear weapons by 2045, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations.

I hope and believe that nuclear weapons can be prohibited and destroyed before they destroy us. However, to do so we need to inform, educate and engage youth. We are the trend setters of today, the decision makers of tomorrow, and the guardians of the next generation.

Most young people, including those in my own country, know very little about nuclear weapons – other than about the nukes of North Korea which are covered by the media. We know even less about the countries and regions that have already rejected nuclear weapons and the initiatives to achieve nuclear disarmament, including those at the United Nations, such as the ban treaty and the 2018 UN High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament.

This is why Abolition 2000, the global civil society network to eliminate nuclear weapons, has established a youth working group – to help youth engage in this vital issue. What we hope is that governments recognise

the importance of engaging youth on this issue, assist with funding so that we can be active, and include our voices in key nuclear disarmament events such as the 2018 UN High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament.

We also call on governments to implement Article 26 of the UN Charter, which is the obligation to reduce military spending and re-invest these resources in social and economic need. Excessive military spending, including the \$100 billion per year on nuclear weapons, is stealing resources from universities, schools, job creation programs, health etc... As President Eisenhower said,

*‘Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.’*

We hope that the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly will take up the call from President Nazarbayev for 1% of military spending to be re-directed to meeting Sustainable Development Goals.

The **2018 UN High-Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament** provides an opportunity for governments and civil society, including youth, to cooperate on and adopt concrete measures for nuclear risk-reduction and disarmament. We need to **reach high** at the UN High-Level Conference, for significant achievements, such as entry-into-force of the nuclear ban treaty, adoption by nuclear States of no-first use policies, promotion of nuclear-weapon-free zones in North East Asia and the Middle East, deep reductions in nuclear stockpiles, and agreement on a framework to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world.

For this reason, youth around the world are today participating in an initiative entitled *Reach HIGH for a nuclear-weapon-free world*. We call on all governments to also reach high – and announce now that you will attend the 2018 UN High-Level Conference **at the highest level**, and with the objective to achieve concrete measures.

Parliamentarians are also joining this call. Indeed, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which represents the parliaments of the 56 OSCE member states, has adopted resolutions supporting the UN High Level Conference, calling on governments to attend at the highest level, and calling for the participation of parliamentarians on government delegations. We would add that youth should also be included on government delegations.

I thank you for the opportunity to present these comments, and I urge you to join with youth, parliamentarians and other representatives of civil society to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons so that there is a sustainable world for you, for us and for future generations.

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