

Speech to the International Conference for Peace and Disarmament
by Ban Ki-moon
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This is the transcript of a speech delivered by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the peace and disarmament conference co-organized by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and many other organizations around the world on May 1, 2010 at Riverside Church in New York City.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Reading the list of organizations and individuals with us this evening, I want to say what an honour it is to be here. I know of your hard work and dedication. I know how much you have sacrificed in standing for your principles and beliefs. I know how much courage it takes to speak out, to protest, to carry the banner of this most noble human aspiration ... world peace. And so, most of all, I am here tonight to thank you.

Let me begin by saying how humbling it is to speak to you in this famous place, Riverside Church. It was here that Martin Luther King Junior spoke against the war in Vietnam. Nelson Mandela spoke here on his first visit to the United States after being freed from prison. Standing with you, looking out, I can see what they saw: a sea of committed women and men, who come from all corners to move the world. It reminds us that of what matters most in life... is not so much the message from the bully pulpit, but rather the movement from the pews. From people like you. And so I say: keep it up.

Our shared vision is within reach ... a nuclear-free world. On the eve of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference ... beginning on Monday ... we know the world is watching. Let it heed our call: Disarm Now!

Ladies and gentlemen,

From my first day in office, I have made nuclear disarmament a top priority. Perhaps, in part, this deep personal commitment comes from my experience as a boy in Korea, growing up after the war. My school was rubble. There were no walls. We studied in the open air.

The United Nations rebuilt my country. I was lucky enough to receive a good education. But more than that, I learned about peace, solidarity and, above all, the power of community action. These values are not abstract principles to me. I owe my life to them. I try to embody them in all my work.

Just a few weeks ago, I travelled to Ground Zero — the former test site at Semipalatinsk, in Kazakhstan, where the Soviet Union detonated more than 450 nuclear explosions. It was strangely beautiful. The great green steppe reached as far as the eye could see. But of course, the eye does not immediately see the scope of the devastation. Vast areas where people still cannot go. Poisoned lakes and rivers. High rates of cancer and birth defects.

After independence, in 1991, Kazakhstan closed the site and banished nuclear weapons from its territory. Today, Semipalatinsk is a powerful symbol of hope ... it is a new Ground Zero for disarmament, the birth-place of the Central Asian nuclear-weapon-free zone.

In August, I will travel to another Ground Zero — Mayor Akiba's proud city of Hiroshima. There, I will repeat our call for a nuclear free-world. The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - and especially the hibakusha - know too well the horror of nuclear war. It must never be repeated!

Yet 65 years later, the world still lives under a nuclear shadow. How long must we wait to rid ourselves of this threat? How long will we keep passing the problem to succeeding generations?

We here tonight know that it is time to end this senseless cycle. We know that nuclear disarmament is not a distant, unattainable dream. It is an urgent necessity, here and now. We are determined to achieve it. We have come close in the past.

Twenty-four years ago, in Reykjavik, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev came within a hair's breath of agreeing to eliminate nuclear weapons. It was a dramatic reminder of how far we can go — as long as we have the vision and the will.

Today's generation of nuclear negotiators must take a lesson from Reykjavik: Be bold. Think big ... for it yields big results.

And that is why, again, we need people like you. People who understand that the world is over-armed and that peace is under-funded. People who understand that the time for change is now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The NPT entered into force 40 years ago. Ever since, it has been the foundation of the non-proliferation regime and our efforts for nuclear disarmament. To quote you, Mr. Gerson: It is one of the seminal agreements of the 20th century. Let's not forget. In 1963, experts predicted that there could be as many as 25 nuclear powers by the end of the last century. It did not happen, in large part because the NPT guided the world in the right direction.

Today, we have reason for renewed optimism. Global public opinion is swinging our way. Governments are looking at the issue with fresh eyes. Consider just the most recent events:

- Leading by example, the United States announced a review of its nuclear posture ... forswearing the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, so long as they are in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- In Prague, President Obama and President Medvedev signed a new START treaty, accompanied by serious cuts in arsenals.
- In Washington, the leaders of 47 nations united in their efforts to keep nuclear weapons and materials out of the hands of terrorists.
- And on Monday, we hope to open a new chapter in the life of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In 2005, when leaders gathered for the last review of the NPT, the outcome did not match expectations. In plainer English, it failed — utterly. We cannot afford to fail again. After all, there are more than 25,000 nuclear weapons in the world's arsenals. Nuclear terrorism remains a real and present danger. There has been no progress in establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East. The nuclear programs of Iran and the DPRK are of serious concern to global efforts to curb nuclear proliferation...

To deal with these and other issues, I have set out my own five-point action plan, and I thank you for your encouraging response. I especially welcome your support for the idea of concluding a Nuclear Weapon Convention. Article VI of the NPT requires the Parties to pursue negotiations on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under international control. These negotiations are long overdue. Next week, I will call on all countries - and most particularly the nuclear-weapon states - to fulfil this obligation. We should not have unrealistic expectations for the conference. But neither can we afford to lower our sights.

What I see on the horizon is a world free of nuclear weapons. What I see before me are the people who will help make it happen. Please keep up your good work. Sound the alarm, keep up the pressure. Ask your leaders what they are doing - personally - to eliminate the nuclear menace. Above all, continue to be the voice of conscience.

We will rid the world of nuclear weapons. And when we do, it will be because of people like you. The world owes you its gratitude.

Thank you.

Ban Ki-moon is Secretary-General of the United Nations.