WILPF Statement on the 2011 Article XIV Conference on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)
23 September 2011

Once again the states parties of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) are gathering in New York to discuss how to facilitate the entry into force of the CTBT. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has supported these efforts since the first such conference in 1999. Like many other non-governmental organizations, WILPF has sought a universal ban on nuclear weapons testing since the first test was conducted in Almogordo, New Mexico on 16 July 1945.

However, WILPF opposes not just nuclear weapons testing, but also the design, development, deployment, and modernization of nuclear weapons. Our organization has been working since 1945 to undermine the reliance on nuclear weapons as instruments of so-called “security” through “deterrence,” and as tools of the conduct of international relations. We have been writing, acting, and organizing to put an end to the existence of nuclear weapons and to transform the systems of power, economics, and politics that maintain them.

The CTBT is often described as a necessary step on the path to nuclear disarmament. Putting a definitive end to nuclear weapons testing would indeed constitute progress toward halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons—it would make it harder for states to develop nuclear weapons if they don’t already have them, and it would make it difficult for states with nuclear weapons to improve them. However, the CTBT does not expressly forbid qualitative improvements to nuclear weapons through subcritical testing and other means. Since 1997, the United States has carried out over 20 subcritical nuclear tests at its Nevada Test Site. This loophole has meant that nuclear weapon states are able to undermine the CTBT’s stated objectives of disarmament and the prevention of further nuclear weapon modernization and subsequent arms races.

Would the United States end subcritical testing if its Senate granted permission to President Obama to ratify the CTBT? There is every reason to believe that it would not. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that in exchange for ratification of this treaty, the military hawks in the US Senate will demand further investment in the US nuclear weapons complex, just as it did in exchange for ratification of New START. For that treaty, which essentially changed the accounting rules on deployed warheads so that Russia and the United States could maintain their arsenals at present levels, the Obama administration committed $185 billion over the next twenty years to the modernization and upgrading of US nuclear weapons, delivery systems, and related infrastructure. Obviously, this money could be much better used elsewhere in order to provide real human security.

Exchanging anti-disarmament measures for a ban on critical nuclear weapons testing is not acceptable. A ban on testing is intended to prevent the design, development, or modernization of nuclear weapons. Any deals given in trade for ratification will only serve to undermine the Treaty and cannot be accepted.
The international community cannot wait for or rely on the US Senate to ratify the CTBT without such anti-disarmament conditions. Therefore, WILPF urges the other Annex II states to ratify the CTBT without delay. This would not only bring about a much-needed atmosphere of cooperation and commitment to collective security in many regions of the world—notably the Middle East and South Asia—but it would also isolate the United States as the sole outlier.

In the meantime, WILPF calls upon the nuclear weapon possessors to maintain their testing moratoria and to cease subcritical testing immediately. In addition, WILPF calls on all of these states to halt their plans for development of new nuclear weapons or modernization of existing warheads, delivery systems, and facilities.

WILPF has also organized to help those affected by nuclear testing around the world to demand compensation and clean-up. WILPF supports the veterans of British atomic weapons testing that occurred in Australia between 1952 and 1963 at Maralinga, Emu Field and the Monte Bello Islands. These people having been calling for compensation for a long time; some of them have joined a class action in Britain.

WILPF also supports the campaign for compensation by Maohi (Polynesian) veterans of French nuclear weapons testing. In the South Pacific, at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls in French Polynesia, France conducted 46 atmospheric and 147 underground nuclear tests over thirty years. In spite of the end of French nuclear testing in 1996, there are lingering concerns over hazards to the environment and the health of local populations. Maohi workers who staffed the test sites from 1966 to 1996 have formed an association to campaign for compensation from the government of France for the health effects of their work.

On the occasion of the first International Day against Nuclear Tests, 29 August 2009, the government of Kazakhstan made an important proposal: the establishment of an international fund—to be managed by the United Nations—to support the survivors of nuclear testing. Along with other NGOs addressing the third International Day against Nuclear Tests earlier this month, WILPF endorsed this idea and called upon the UN Secretary-General to organize a conference under the auspices of the United Nations to help mobilize resources for the remediation of contamination and health monitoring and rehabilitation of downwinders near nuclear test sites around the world. States responsible for the testing at major test sites should report to the conference—and on an annual basis every year thereafter—on their current and future efforts and resource allocations to address the health and environmental impacts of nuclear testing and to rehabilitate populations that have been particularly impacted. Independent non-governmental experts and affected communities should be invited to contribute to these meetings.