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QUESTION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS TESTS

Letter dated 4 May 1959 from the Permanent Representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the United Nations, addressed to the Secretary-General

New York, 4 May 1959

I have the honour to transmit herewith the text of letters from Mr. N.S. Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, to Mr. D. Eisenhower, President of the United States of America, and Mr. H. Macmillan, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, dated 23 April 1959, on the cessation of nuclear weapon tests.

I should be grateful if you would arrange for these letters to be issued as an official United Nations document and circulated to all Members of the United Nations.

(Signed) A. SOBOLEV  
Permanent Representative of the USSR  
to the United Nations

COMMUNICATION FROM N.S. KHRUSHCHEV TO H. MACMILLAN,  
PRIME MINISTER OF GREAT BRITAIN

dated 23 April 1959

Sir,

I have received your letter of 13 April, expressing your support for President Eisenhower's proposal concerning the cessation of nuclear weapons tests, to begin with, only in the atmosphere up to a height of 50 kilometres. The Soviet Government has carefully studied the arguments adduced by President Eisenhower and our position on the substance of that proposal is explained in my communication to the President of the United States, a copy of which I am enclosing herewith.

I must at once point out that, in our opinion, the proposal does not solve the problem connected with the cessation of nuclear weapon tests. I should like to explain my position. Let us assume that only explosions in the atmosphere up to an altitude of 50 kilometres are banned. Clearly that would not cover all other possible ways of conducting nuclear weapons tests, namely at altitudes exceeding 50 kilometres as well as below ground and under water. Consequently we would not achieve our aim of halting the nuclear armaments race, or at least the development of ever more destructive types of atomic and hydrogen weapons.

Nor would we attain the other and no less important aim of preventing the pollution of the atmosphere, the soil and the water by radioactive products harmful to human health, and the contamination of vegetation which is used as food by animals and finds its way into the human organism.

I recall with pleasure the conversations we had in Moscow on the situation at the Geneva Conference on the discontinuance of nuclear weapons tests. At that time, you expressed some ideas for surmounting one of the main difficulties which had arisen at the Conference - the procedure for on-site inspection of events suspected of being nuclear explosions. You pointed out that the possibility of agreement on the cessation of nuclear weapons tests would be brought closer if we were to agree to determine in advance for each side the number of on-site inspections to be allowed each year. The number of annual inspections should, of course, be small. Indeed, there is no need for many inspection teams to visit each of the countries concerned.

To His Excellency Mr. Harold Macmillan,  
Prime Minister of Great Britain

The possibility of exercising control in an area where, from instrument readings, a nuclear explosion is suspected to have taken place, will inevitably restrain States from violating the obligations they have assumed since they will have to reckon with the fact that inspection teams might detect such violations. Naturally, suspicions that explosions have taken place must be founded on objective instrument readings and not on the conclusions of members of the control organ staff.

You will recall that at that time we were favourably disposed towards your proposal, and we still believe that it can serve as a sound basis for a successful solution to the problem of the cessation of atomic and hydrogen weapon tests and for the conclusion of a comprehensive agreement on that issue. The Soviet delegation has been instructed to submit that proposal to the Geneva Conference.

I am sure that you, for your part, will instruct your representative at the Geneva Conference to seek a solution to this difficult problem along the lines suggested by you in Moscow.

I think you will agree that an understanding on the despatch of inspection teams would pave the way for agreement on the cessation of tests of all types of nuclear weapons, which would, in turn, help considerably to create a favourable atmosphere for the settlement of other international problems in the interests of a lasting peace.

I have the honour to be, etc.

(Signed) N. KHRUSHCHEV

COMMUNICATION FROM MR. N.S. KHRUSHCHEV TO MR. D. EISENHOWER  
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

dated 23 April 1959

Sir,

I have received your communication of 13 April concerning the resumption of the Geneva talks on the cessation of nuclear weapons tests. I am pleased to note that you also hold the view that those talks must not be allowed to fail.

You ask whether it is not possible, as a beginning, to agree on the suspension of nuclear weapons tests only in the atmosphere up to an altitude of 50 kilometres, laying aside, for the time being, the problem of ending other forms of nuclear explosions, that is, explosions at altitudes exceeding 50 kilometres and under the ground.

The Soviet Government has made a careful and detailed study of the points made in your communication and considers that the cessation merely of nuclear weapons explosions carried out at heights of up to 50 kilometres would not solve the problem.

If we were to conclude such an agreement now, how, one may ask, would that benefit the peoples, who eagerly seek the complete prohibition of all nuclear weapons tests? By doing so we would merely mislead the public, since the tests would in fact continue under ground and at great altitudes. We would thus fail to achieve our objective of preventing the manufacture of new and ever more destructive types of atomic weapons.

Moreover, nuclear weapons tests conducted at heights above 50 kilometres would continue to poison the atmosphere and the soil and contaminate with radioactive fall-out the plants which are used as food by animals and enter the human organism, exactly as is happening at the present time. I think you will agree that, from the point of view of human health, there is no difference between the radioactive fall-out from an explosion carried out at the height of 40 kilometres and from one at, say, 60 kilometres. Consequently, from this point of view also, the objective we must strive for would not be achieved. The peoples would therefore be justified in condemning the conclusion of an agreement on the cessation of tests only in the atmosphere at altitudes of up to 50 kilometres as a dishonest transaction. Needless to say such an agreement

To His Excellency Mr. D. Eisenhower,  
President of the United States of America

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could only be concluded on the assumption that the public was ignorant of the facts; but that is out of the question today, as scientists would at once grasp the substance of such an agreement and would explain that it did not solve the problem but left the situation as it had been before the agreement was concluded.

I feel we should not halt in the face of difficulties, but should muster our strength of will and realize the need for an agreement providing for the cessation of all types of nuclear weapons tests - in the atmosphere, under ground, under water and at great altitudes.

In my opinion, there is every possibility of solving the problem of the cessation of tests, on the basis of your proposals and ours, in a manner that will serve the interests both of States possessing nuclear weapons and of all other States, and at the same time of establishing a form of control that will guarantee strict observance of the agreement.

Our main difference of opinion seems to be over the despatch of inspection teams to investigate events suspected of being a nuclear explosion.

As you are aware, during his stay in Moscow, Mr. Macmillan, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, expressed the view that agreement could be reached on a predetermined number of annual inspections to be carried out both in Soviet Union territory and in the territories of the United States, and the United Kingdom and their possessions, should the reports of control posts indicate the occurrence of events that might be suspected of being a nuclear explosion. Such inspections would naturally be few in number and I feel, for my part, that there would be no need for many visits to each country.

The very fact of possible investigation in areas where instrument readings indicate events which may be suspected of being nuclear explosions would restrain States, or individuals in those States, from conducting explosions in violation of obligations they had assumed. That is understandable, since, under such conditions, no States, or organizations within a State, would be able to avoid an effective inspection of areas in which nuclear explosions are suspected to have taken place. Such suspicions should not, of course, be based on the conclusions of persons on the staff of the control organ, but on the objective indications of instruments.

In conclusion I should like to express the hope that the Soviet Government's proposals will be received with understanding on your part and that we shall be able to reach agreement on one of the most important and urgent problems of our time. We, for our part, shall do your utmost to attain agreement on the cessation of nuclear weapon tests and you may be confident that if we sign such a document, we shall scrupulously fulfil our undertakings, even in the absence of any form of control, because it is public opinion, - the opinion of the peoples - that the Soviet Union values above all else.

I have the honour to be, etc.

(Signed) N. KHRUSHCHEV

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