

International day against Nuclear Tests – Kazakhstan

25 August 2011

By Mattias Munk-Petersen

The Embassy of Kazakhstan in Brussels organised a meeting in view of 29 August, which has been designated by the UN as the day of global effort to prevent nuclear tests and to commemorate the anniversary of shutting down one of the world's largest nuclear test sites at Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan, in 1999. To highlight the event, the Embassy of Kazakhstan organised a roundtable discussion, in Brussels, with H.E. Mr. Jigalov Konstantin Vasilevich, Prof. Dr. Hamid Aït Abderrahim of SCK-CEN and Mr. Irnerio Seminatore, President of the European Institute for International Relations (IERI)

The Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan hosted more than 400 nuclear tests during the Soviet Union occupation, while very little attention was given to the effect of the nuclear test for the local people and environment. Kazakhstan contains 15% of the world's uranium resources and is the world's leading producer of uranium. It is currently aiming to sell value-added fuel rather than just uranium, planning to supply 30% of the world's fuel production by 2015. Kazakhstan is currently also considering future prospects for the production of nuclear power.

One of the main topics of discussion was the utopist versus the realist viewpoints on nuclear power. The utopists claim that a peaceful use of nuclear energy is viable. Conversely, the realists believe that even peaceful use of nuclear power will irrevocably result in the construction of Weapons of Mass destruction (WMD). It is arguable whether nuclear power can be the ultimate solution to our energy problem, both due to security risks but also from a humanitarian aspect. A positive example of a nation using nuclear power only in a peaceful way, highlighted by Prof. Dr. Abderrahim, is Belgium. It currently receives around 60% of its total energy consumption from nuclear power without having obtained WMD. Mr. Irnerio Seminatore, president of the Institut Européen Des Relations Internationales (IERI), on the other hand, argued that, looking at the situation globally, there would either be nuclear energy with the presence of WMD in some countries or there would not be any nuclear energy at all. The application of "peaceful" nuclear energy would not work, as the different countries would seek to promote their national interests, for example by producing nuclear weapons as a means to increase their level of security. This point of view, in the realist approach, often also uses a historical perspective, as the development of peaceful nuclear energy after WW II quickly led to a nuclear arms race, primarily between the Soviet Union and the United States. Mr. Seminatore highlighted that, as history shows, politicians always seek to promote their national and not human interests, as our history also shows. This is especially interesting in concern to Kazakhstan, which, from a humanitarian aspect, has a very negative history concerning nuclear testing but also from an economical aspect is heavily reliant on its export of uranium.

Prof. Dr. Hamid Aït argued that we generally need to rethink our energy situation in general, since a minority (red. the developed world) of the world's population is over-consuming energy to an extreme level, while a majority (red. the less developed and developing world) receives very little or no energy at all. Mr. David Fouquet, Senior Associate at the European Institute of Asian Studies (EIAS), presented a different perspective, claiming that nuclear technology was a dead end technology, due to the huge concerns handling waste and it not being economical competitive. Mr. Fouquet also argued

for a different approach towards the energy problem, with a focus on finding a decentralised energy solution, viable for the millions of people for whom it is not foreseeable to get access to the energy grid, such as solar, wind or geothermal projects. This solution, though, is never as popular with governments, as the big “billion dollars projects” have a greater potential in creating an increased number of jobs, while also finding it easier to attract capital needed for such projects. It is often more difficult for local businessmen to obtain the required capital to invest in, for example, solar, wind or geothermal projects, as they generally are considered by banks as more risky, compared to the big organisations or firms investing in nuclear plants. Overall, two debates came up during the seminar, a moral one and a more political one. The former highlighted the civil society’s point of view and the more humanitarian aspects, while the latter one related to national interests and the reconversion of nuclear energy.

Nuclear energy has generally become a topic that has attracted less and less positive stories during the last few decades. The recent tragic catastrophe at the Fukuyama plant in Japan, often compared to the Chernobyl catastrophe, brought the topic back to the forefront of criticism and raised a reevaluation of the sustainability and security of nuclear power. The developing world’s and especially China’s increasing demand for energy is forcing us to find a solution for our energy problem and it is arguable whether we can afford not to use nuclear power as a source of energy. Kazakhstan, in this context, has the potential to become an important actor, as it is cooperating with the SCK-CEN, for example with the [MYRRHA](#) project, as well as for its natural resources. It has, however, long and rather negative experiences with nuclear tests, especially in a humanitarian aspect. Although these aspects are in stark contrast with each other, they also give Kazakhstan the potential to unite both the humanitarian aspect with a wish for both a stable energy provider and an increased economic growth.

The path Kazakhstan will take regarding the use of nuclear power is one that must be followed closely, as it can be of great importance to Central Asia, Asia and Europe, whether or not it will be able to use nuclear power only to peaceful means, both in terms of humanitarian and economic point of view.