

WE SHOULD CONTINUE WITH MORATORIUM ON NUCLEAR TESTS

The only viable option for us

By S RAJAGOPAL

IT is interesting that India was the first to propose the Standstill agreements on test ban as early as 1954, at a time when the race for acquiring nuclear arms had not yet started vigorously. Only two countries e.g. the United States and the former Soviet Union had tested nuclear weapons by then and stopping testing would have been definitely an effective step towards disarmament and non-proliferation.

Unfortunately, the US failed to see the merit in the proposal and in fact accelerated the arms race by constantly improving the quality and quantity of weapons quickly followed by Russia and later by the other three weapon states e.g., UK, France and China.

It is after a lapse of several decades and after the end of cold war that the US decided to seriously engage in negotiating a CTBT. After two years of negotiation at the Conference on Disarmament at Geneva (1994-96), the weapon powers realised that the CTBT could not be pushed through as easily as the indefinite extension of NPT which legitimatised their possession of nuclear weapons.

Important clause

India rejected the CTBT linking it with time-bound disarmament which resulted in the treaty being taken through the United Nations General Assembly in September 1996. Since September 1996, the treaty is open for signature and an important clause in the treaty "Entry into Force" (Article XIV) stipulates that 44 countries which operate nuclear power reactors need to sign for the treaty to come into force. The key elements of CTBT apart from banning "nu-

clear weapon tests or any other nuclear explosion" are, the International Monitoring System (IMS), On-site inspections and confidence building measures. The IMS, which is the verification arm of the treaty, would use seismological, radio-nuclide, hydro-acoustics and infra-sound which are advanced technical means monitoring the ban.

Close monitoring

The IMS would consist of about 50 primary and 120 auxiliary seismological stations backed up by about 80 radio nuclide, 11 hydro-acoustic and 60 infrasound stations spread around the world to closely monitor test. In addition, satellite imageries would be extensively used as part of national technical means (NTM) which is only used by the US and Russia.

The objective of the CTBT is to cap development and qualitative improvements of nuclear weapons by testing. However, the CTBT neither addresses the stockpile nor other means of development of newer weapons and refining the existing weapons. For example, simulation techniques and conducting sub-critical experiments (SCE) fall beyond the scope of the CTBT. Even under CTBT, the possibility of clandestine testing cannot be ruled out, especially when the threshold detection limit has been put as one kiloton. The usefulness of sub-kiloton low yield test and its efficacy in the development of radically new or significantly improved nuclear weapons is a debatable issue among many scientists.

The US has so far conducted three sub-critical experiments under the pretext that these do not violate the CTBT and that the tests are needed to ensure the safety, security and reliability of the stockpile. Even in the case of SCE, the opinion of scientists as to the need for such tests is widely debated. It is clear from all this that the CTBT is so designed that while it would ensure the security, safety and reliability of the stockpile perpetuating the special status, security and leverage of the weapon powers it would deny other nations the opportunity to develop a deterrent in their national security interests. It is also clear from various officials of the US that the nuclear deterrence is not going to be abandoned. In fact, all steps are being taken to ensure that the stockpile is maintained in a safe, secure and reliable status. The situation with reference to other nuclear powers do not appear to be any different from the position of the US.

Additional conditions

Viewed in this background and the fact that India has already detonated five nuclear devices including a thermonuclear device, It has either the option to reject or accept after stipulating certain conditions. The Prime Minister in a recent statement had said that India would consider signing CTBT but with some additional conditions without anyhow clearly stating what these conditions are.

Rejection of CTBT at this juncture would be a hard option and is likely to subject India to greater

pressure from the P-5 and at the same time to delink time-bound disarmament would be illogical and immoral, immoral in a sense that India would be willing to give up its noble goal of weapon-free world just because of the changed situation of declaring itself as a weapon-state.

Second option

The second option of a conditional acceptance would be better since it will signal certain flexibility in India's attitude. The conditions could be weapon powers sharing information on weapons similar to what US has promised China, dismantling all sanctions and embargoes and permanent membership in the Security Council. Till such time there is an understanding on the conditions, India should continue with the unilaterally declared moratorium.

It is clear from various official statements of the US that the nuclear deterrence is not going to be abandoned. In fact, all steps are being taken to ensure that the stockpile is maintained in a safe, secure and reliable status. The situation with reference to the other nuclear powers does not appear to be any different from the position of the US placed in a situation with the P-5 refusing to commit themselves on a time-bound disarmament, the only viable option for India would be to declare a moratorium on tests and watch the process of steps that the P-5 would take in the direction of getting rid of the nuclear weapons once and for all.

The author is former Secretary, Atomic Energy Commission, Government of India.