Nuclear treaty's credibility to be tested: U.N. disarmament head

By Seana K. Magee
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Following the collapse of this year's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review meeting, the United Nations' head of disarmament says that diplomatic work must get underway to avoid putting the landmark pact's credibility into question when it again comes up for review in 2020.

"That work should start from now, otherwise we run the risk of repeating the failure which would maybe put the credibility of the NPT regime at serious risk," Kim Won Soo, acting high representative for disarmament affairs, said of the conference in New York that ended without the desired result.

An outcome document was not realized after the month-long meeting ended in May, much to the disappointment of many around the globe, including atomic bomb survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who lived through the aftermath of the explosions 70 years ago.

"(The) NPT review conference was disappointing," said Kim in a recent one-on-one interview with Kyodo News. "It shows that the international community still has a serious division over how to reach the destination of a world free of nuclear weapons."

Kim emphasized that member states who are tasked with negotiating disarmament issues in New York and Geneva must make "concerted efforts" to secure a successful outcome, adding they "cannot afford to lose time" in preparing for the next review cycle.

Kim pointed out that at the time of the next review conference it will be half a century since the nonproliferation treaty took effect and also a quarter century since its indefinite extension.

Under the NPT, which entered into force in 1970, nuclear powers pledge to work toward disarmament of their nuclear arsenals in exchange for the promise that nonnuclear nations would not seek to acquire them, while making nuclear energy for peaceful purposes accessible to any country that wants it. A review conference is held once every five years.

Kim, who serves as undersecretary general, also stressed the importance of having countries that have not
ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty do so.

Adopted by the General Assembly in 1996, the CTBT aims to establish a verifiable permanent ban on all types of nuclear explosives. To enter into force, it must be signed and ratified by the 44 countries that had nuclear reactors for research or power generation while the treaty was under negotiation. Eight of those states -- the United States, China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan -- have yet to ratify it.

"We have to remind those countries who have not ratified the CTBT to do so next year as we observe the 20th anniversary of the signature of the CTBT," Kim, a former South Korean diplomat, noted.

Speaking of U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's possible visit to North Korea, Kim explained that negotiations are ongoing. It would be the first visit for Ban, a former South Korean foreign minister, to the country during his tenure as the U.N. chief. The last time a U.N. Secretary General visited was in 1993.

In reference to the visit, Kim said the United Nations is "ready to help in any manner possible," adding that "there is a strong consensus on the need to work for peace, stability and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Looking back at the NPT conference, Kim also emphasized the role atomic bomb survivors, called hibakusha, had played and how the disarmament office is focused on conveying their stories.

Since 2010 his office has held briefings with hibakusha twice a year with an emphasis on educating tour guides and interns so survivors' experiences are more widely understood. The contribution of the hibakusha "elevated" the discussion and carried a "very powerful message," he said.