

# International Day Against Nuclear Tests | Earth 911

Gemma Alexander

Most people are opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, but fewer are concerned about testing them.

After all, many people argue, these controlled, scientific tests may act as a deterrent to the weapons' use. But nuclear weapons testing has a disturbing legacy of environmental destruction and civilian deaths. The United Nations established August 29 as the [International Day Against Nuclear Tests](#) to focus global attention on the damage to environment and harm to people caused by nuclear weapons testing.

## Tests vs. Weapons

The United Nations creates international days of observance for important global issues as tools to educate people and accelerate activism.

Nuclear disarmament and world peace are explicit goals of the United Nations, but that is not what the International Day Against Nuclear Tests is about. In 2009, the UN designated August 29 to educate people about the problems associated with weapons testing. Four years later, the UN established September 26 as a day to focus on [eliminating all nuclear weapons](#).

## Test Damage

For most people, the image of nuclear weapons testing is a top-secret wartime group of American scientists working in the New Mexico desert. Or perhaps they think of the [Bikini Atoll](#), an unpopulated desert island sacrificed to science in a series of nuclear tests between 1948 and 1955.

In fact, since 1945 at least eight countries have collectively conducted about [2,000 nuclear tests](#), of which more than half were carried out by the United States. From 1951 to 1963, the U.S. tested nuclear weapons above ground in the Nevada desert – a place so bleak that it's hard to imagine anything living there to be affected by the explosions.

But the impact was huge. Not only were thousands of workers at the test sites exposed to radiation, but nuclear fallout drifted to nearby communities, causing 49,000 cancer deaths according to one [national estimate](#). Congress eventually [paid more than \\$2 billion](#) in damages.

The [Bikini Atoll](#) was not an uninhabited island. The U.S. displaced more than 150 Marshall Islanders from their traditional lifestyle on Bikini to enable the test. These people were repeatedly relocated over the next few years to a variety of unsuitable islands. They suffered starvation and (together with the crew of a Japanese fishing boat, one of whom died from acute radiation) were irradiated during subsequent testing.

On March 5, 2001, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal awarded damages of \$563,315,500.00 to the Bikini Islanders.



US Army nuclear test at Bikini Atoll, Micronesia, on July 25, 1946. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

## Environmental Impacts

Humans are not the only victims of nuclear testing. Animals are also subject to radiation poisoning and potential genetic mutations from radioactive exposure, with most mammals sharing humans' sensitivity to radiation. [Plant species](#) have a broad range of sensitivity to

radiation, with some species of trees, particularly pine and spruce, roughly as sensitive to radiation as humans.

Habitats also suffer [direct damage](#) from the blasts. Test blasts destroy coral reefs; can trigger forest fires, landslides, and tsunamis; and can create artificial geothermal systems.

Even [underground tests](#) can create seismic activity and produce above-ground radioactive debris through a process called venting.

### **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty**

A major goal of the International Day Against Nuclear Tests is to increase support for the 1996 [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty](#) (CTBT). This treaty is an international legal instrument to put an [end to all forms](#) of nuclear testing. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said,

The legacy of nuclear testing is nothing but destruction. The CTBT is vital to ensuring there are no more victims; it is also essential to advancing nuclear disarmament. On the International Day Against Nuclear Tests, I reiterate my call for all States that have not yet done so, to sign and ratify the Treaty, especially those whose ratification is needed for the Treaty's entry into force. In a world of rising tensions and divisions, our collective security depends on it."

More than 168 nations have [already ratified](#) the treaty. But the treaty will not go into effect until it is ratified by eight key nations, including the United States. The U.S. has not performed nuclear tests since the early 1990s. But there is little chance of it ratifying the CTBT anytime soon. On the contrary, the Trump administration has been [actively considering](#) the renewal of nuclear testing.

To help move the world away from nuclear testing, you can [join](#) the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Committee Against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). To move the U.S. toward ratifying the CTBT, you can vote in November for candidates who [oppose nuclear testing](#).

*Feature image: [Nuclear weapon test Bravo on Bikini Atoll](#), United States Department of Energy / Public domain*

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