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USNDC Director briefs U.S. Energy Secretary, CTBTO Executive Secretary

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – At an event held Nov. 30 in Washington, D.C., the director of the U.S. National Data Center here briefed high-ranking members of the U.S. and international communities about the Air Force Technical Applications Center's involvement in nuclear treaty monitoring verification.

Senior Executive Service Director of the USNDC, David Merker, traveled to Capitol Hill to participate in the National Nuclear Security Administration's "Nuclear Explosion Monitoring: 60 Years of Science and Innovation" conference in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Its purpose was to share valuable insight on how, through joint collaboration, innovations and breakthroughs in nuclear monitoring and global nuclear proliferation have helped contribute to a safer and more secure world.



Merker met with U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest J. Moniz and Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization Dr. Lassina Zerbo, to discuss USNDC's role with regard to the CTBT as well as strategic plans for moving the CTBT towards entry into force (ratification).

"My discussion with Secretary Moniz and Dr. Zerbo focused on AFTAC's significant history as the United States' premier organization conducting nuclear monitoring using national technical means," said Merker. "Our display at the conference illustrated AFTAC's numerous key achievements throughout the years as well as highlighted models of our space systems and deployable analysis system."

The event was co-sponsored by the Department of Energy and the Department of State to highlight the technological achievements over the last 60 years in treaty monitoring innovation and verification science. According to Merker, AFTAC's participation was considered essential to tell the story of how these emerging and established technologies have been operationally implemented through the years.

"I have been a part of AFTAC for almost three decades now," said Merker, "and my goal for this event was to be the 'bottom-line-upfront' person on behalf of the AFTAC commander to set the tone that the United States technical laboratories and operators are mature, skilled and ready to meet the 24/7 challenges the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty may bring once entered into force."

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In 1999, the U.S. Senate voted to reject ratification by a vote of 51-48, marking the first time in U.S. history that a security-related treaty was defeated. The treaty fell 19 votes short of achieving the necessary two-thirds majority necessary for ratification. Since that time, many U.S. lawmakers have expressed support of a moratorium on nuclear testing, but the treaty itself has not yet been entered into force.

During his second term of office, President Barack Obama expressed hope in seeing the treaty put into force. “We will work to build support in the United States to ratify the CTBT accord,” he said at a speech in June 2012.



In a release issued by NNSA, Moniz was impressed with the progress towards ratification.

“It is clear that in the 17 years since the Senate looked at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the technologies in both dimensions of science-based stockpile stewardship without testing and of monitoring and verification have come tremendously far,” said Moniz. “It’s time to reexamine the question of ratification. United States ratification alone cannot bring the CTBT into force, but it will provide a strengthened platform to move forward major national and international security interests.”

In addition to networking in an exhibition-like setting, Merker had the opportunity to participate in a panel of nuclear treaty experts involved in monitoring technologies and operations. His role as to further explain the USNDC’s involvement and commitment to treaty monitoring. He accompanied Dr. Randy Bell, CTBTO’s Director of the International Data Center, Dr. Steve Ashby, Director of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, and Al-Sharif Nasser bin Nasser of the Middle East Scientific Institute for Security in Jordan, who discussed a recent Integrated Field Exercise his nation hosted to demonstrate the viability and processes associated with an on-site inspection.

“It was important for me to highlight how AFTAC’s capabilities are critical to our national decision-makers,” said Merker. “Regardless of whether the political winds are blowing towards enhanced treaties or focused on national technical means to monitor established treaties, our center’s capabilities are very much appreciated and valued by U.S. and international communities. In today’s challenging global environment, having a trusted and proven national capability like AFTAC is vital. As one panelist said, ‘AFTAC is indeed a national treasure.’ I certainly agree with that description.”

Staff Sgt. BreAnne Groth, an AFTAC space operations system analyst, accompanied Merker to the event to brief visitors on the center’s seismic and debris collection capabilities as well as its space-based systems.

“Most people who visited our display did not know the U.S. had space-based systems for treaty verification,” said Groth. “It was exciting as well as rewarding to share information about what I get to do every day. Many attendees asked a lot of great questions about our mission, and I felt like we left a great impression about what AFTAC does and how we monitor nuclear treaties.”