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SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
5th meeting
held on
Wednesday, 14 October 1981
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 5th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. IRUMBA (Uganda)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 59: EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (A/36/439, A/SPC/36/L.2)
(continued)

1. Mr. MARTINEZ (Argentina) said that the work of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Radiation had made an enormous contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the subject. Argentina had assigned a major role to nuclear research, especially with respect to energy plans and other applications for peaceful purposes. The use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as a generator of development - i.e., of a higher level of well-being - would continue to increase in future. In that connection, Argentina was concerned to note that some countries, although they were receiving the benefits of nuclear energy, were not attaching due importance to the studies undertaken by the Scientific Committee on observed levels of ionizing radiation and its effects on human beings and the environment.
2. His delegation stressed the need for developing the work of the Committee to the maximum possible extreme. To that end, he emphasized the importance of paragraph 4 of document A/35/451, concerning the compilation of analyses of samples, which was an essential requirement for the preparation of the report. Following the precedents of earlier years, draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2, of which Argentina was a sponsor, should be adopted by consensus.
3. Mr. BOLE (Fiji), referring to the question of the effects of atomic radiation, said that his delegation had taken note of the interim report of the Scientific Committee contained in document A/36/439. In keeping with its mandate, the Committee had been reviewing scientific documents in preparation for its next substantive report which was due in 1982. Especially for developing countries which lacked the means to investigate fully the levels and effects of radiation on mankind, such studies would constitute an invaluable source of information.
4. He was concerned to note that, in spite of the sad fate of millions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, production of nuclear weapons and nuclear-weapon tests were continuing. Mankind was still exposed to the perils of radiation and the Pacific region was no exception. Consequently, the leaders of the South Pacific Forum countries, who had recently met in the Republic of Vanuatu, had condemned "any actions representing further exploitation of the Pacific for nuclear purposes" and had reaffirmed their "strong condemnation of testing of nuclear weapons or dumping or storage of nuclear waste in the Pacific by any Government as having deleterious effects on the people and the environment of the region." The Commonwealth Heads of Government, who had met in Australia from 30 September to 7 October 1981, had also "shared the concern of member Governments in the South Pacific over continued nuclear testing in the region."
5. As a member of the South Pacific Forum, Fiji was opposed to all forms of nuclear testing and to any moves to bury radioactive waste on the sea-bed. The fact that the Pacific region, which was made up largely of fragile coral atolls, was prone to earthquakes and other geological instabilities added to that concern. Those considerations explained Fiji's abiding interest in the work of the Scientific Committee.

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(Mr. Bole, Fiji)

In accordance with General Assembly resolution 35/12, it was essential that States, and especially nuclear-weapon States, should place at the Committee's disposal relevant data about the doses, effects and risks from various sources of radiation. Finally, in view of the importance of the item under discussion, his delegation would once again co-sponsor the draft resolution on the item (A/SPC/36/L.2).

6. Mr. TORRES (Chile), referring to the study of effects of atomic radiation, said that Chile was well aware of the potentially harmful consequences, for human life and the environment, of the use of nuclear energy. At the same time, he was convinced that the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation would continue to play an important role in promoting the wider and safer use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

7. In view of the many different consequences of nuclear explosions and tests, Chile favoured the adoption, as soon as possible and after consideration of all the relevant aspects, of an agreement on a complete nuclear test ban. Also, new rules of international law should be adopted to regulate the use of nuclear energy sources in outer space, a question which was being tackled by the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Lastly, the Scientific Committee should continue to co-operate actively with Member States and specialized agencies to ensure that the use of nuclear energy, which was a vital instrument for the development of many countries, became more safe and more trustworthy. Accordingly, access by all countries to nuclear technology on fair and non-discriminatory terms should be eased, and safeguard agreements and all other provisions relating to the safe and efficient use of that type of energy should be strengthened. The delegation of Chile wished therefore to join the sponsors of draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2.

8. Mr. KANAKARATNE (Sri Lanka) said that the effects of atomic radiation on the inhabitants of the planet, and also on the environment, were now reaching proportions which required the urgent attention of the international community. As long ago as 1955 the General Assembly, recognizing the potential hazards of the achievements of nuclear science, had established the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation. His delegation was glad to note the continuing co-operation in that area between the Committee and the various related agencies of the United Nations family, in particular the United Nations Environment Programme. The effects of atomic radiation on human life and the environment were global in impact. Nature knew no geographical boundaries, no racial distinctions, and no ideological divisions. The negative results of atomic radiation transcended all such differences. His delegation was therefore particularly heartened by the fact that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America were both sponsors of draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2; and Sri Lanka also wished to join the sponsors of the draft resolution. In that connection, he wished to recall that the United Nations had been created thirty-six years previously "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." During the intervening period, there had been an increasing awareness of the possibility that mankind might succumb to the dangers of the nuclear scourge. It was in that spirit that the Government of people and Sri Lanka commended the work of the Scientific Committee and looked forward with great hope to the comprehensive report which the Committee would be presenting to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session.

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(Mr. Carazo, Venezuela)

9. Mr. CARAZO (Venezuela) said that the protection and improvement of human life and the conservation of the environment occupied an important place in the scale of priorities for governmental activities in Venezuela. His delegation therefore thanked the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation for the admirable work it had accomplished since its establishment, and looked forward to the publication of the substantive report which the General Assembly was to consider at its thirty-seventh session.

10. Venezuela shared the fears of a possible outbreak of nuclear war, and was opposed to further nuclear tests in any environment and also to the manufacture and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction. It wished to associate itself with other countries of the Pacific which had expressed their concern at the frequent use of that region for nuclear tests and for dumping radioactive wastes. The countries engaged in such practices should either discontinue them or carry them out in their own territories, and should provide other members of the international community with adequate guarantees that such activities would not have harmful effects on human beings or the environment.

11. Venezuela recognized the great importance of atomic energy in mankind's process of development, but it was also aware of the possible danger involved, which particularly affected the developing countries, since they did not have the technology needed to provide adequate protection. International co-operation in that sphere should be expanded.

12. Some years earlier his delegation had pointed out that the Scientific Committee, in order to prepare its report and evaluate the compromises regarding the environmental and personal doses of ionizing radiation to which all mankind was exposed, had taken as a basis the data supplied by a small number of developed countries, in which radiological protection measures were better; for that reason, his delegation suspected and feared that the dose must be significantly greater. On that occasion it had asked the Scientific Committee to study the question and clarify doubts and fears concerning the possible carcinogenic effect of low doses of ionizing radiation on human beings, as in the case of the diagnostic method of mammography and its possible contribution to the production of cancer in women. His delegation now wished to express its satisfaction at the amount of information the Scientific Committee had received from Member States and international organizations, and it hoped that the analysis and processing of that information would make it possible to submit a substantive report that would clear up the doubts and concerns expressed.

13. Lastly, his delegation supported draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2, which it hoped would be adopted by consensus.

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(Mr. Percival, Australia)

14. Mr. PERCIVAL (Australia) expressed satisfaction at the progress made by the Scientific Committee in its general programme of work and, in particular, in the preparation of its substantive report to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session, as well as at the co-operation given to the Scientific Committee by Member States, the specialized agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency and non-governmental organizations.

15. The Governments of the South Pacific area, as they had made clear at the South Pacific Forum meeting held in August 1981 and at the recent meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government at Melbourne, felt concerned about the dangers created by nuclear-weapon tests in the region and the proposals to dispose of nuclear wastes there. Australia, which had sought a cessation of all nuclear-weapon testing in all environments, added its voice to those of New Zealand and the South Pacific Island leaders in their expressions of concern.

16. In conclusion, he said that his delegation joined others in sponsoring draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2 and hoped that the Committee would adopt it by consensus.

17. Mr. LENNUYEUX COMNENE (France) said that his delegation had taken note of the report (A/36/439) in which the Scientific Committee described its work on the effects of atomic radiation. It was gratified at the scientific data and documents that had been furnished to the Scientific Committee and would be used in the preparation of its report to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session.

18. The French authorities, for their part, had answered the questions asked of them through the Scientific Committee. For that reason, France had joined in sponsoring draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2, which requested the Scientific Committee to continue its work to increase knowledge concerning ionizing radiation from all sources and in which appreciation was expressed to Member States for the assistance rendered to the Committee in that field.

19. It was therefore surprising that during the current year some sponsors of the draft resolution were calling into question the elements of scientific information on the effects of ionizing radiation obtained by the Scientific Committee that related to the experiments carried out by France in underground areas of Mururoa Atoll, which was far from any population centres. The international community was aware that those underground explosions were completely confined and that their power was only one-tenth as large as the power of explosions carried out elsewhere at an equal depth. He recalled that a telemetering network to monitor radiological effects in the nearest inhabited atolls had been established and had never recorded the slightest radio-activity, thereby demonstrating the harmlessness of the tests in the rest of Polynesia.

20. In that connection, it was useful to mention the annual report published in April 1981 by the Christchurch laboratory in New Zealand on radio-activity in the environment, with data collected in 1980; according to that report, since the beginning of the French nuclear tests in the South Pacific in 1975, monitors had

(Mr. Lennuyeux Commène, France)

not detected any new fission products. French authorities had established a consultative committee on safety to set the conditions for the protection of the coastal populations. For each explosion, a safety report was issued, and the French Government published every year a report on the monitoring of radio-activity, which it made available to the Scientific Committee.

21. Mr. REMEDI (Uruguay) said that his country supported the work of the Scientific Committee and was optimistically awaiting the next substantive report which that Committee would submit to the General Assembly. It was necessary to reaffirm the need for intensifying precautionary measures with regard to everything related to atomic radiation and the negative consequences that irresponsible handling of such radiation could have on the environment, producing mutations which in most cases were irreversible. In his delegation's view, those measures would have to be adjusted as rigorously as possible not only to concepts which could be regarded today as being based on positive knowledge concerning the effects of radiation itself but also to policies of prudence and abstention in cases in which those effects were not yet precisely known.

22. In conclusion, he said that his delegation joined others in sponsoring draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2.

23. Mr. WYSE (Sierra Leone), referring to the relatively infrequent phenomenon of a draft resolution (A/SPC/36/L.2) sponsored by both the Soviet Union and the United States, said his delegation considered that a sign that the two super-Powers had come to realize that the effects of atomic radiation knew no frontiers and that everyone was subject to the same risks.

24. Although his delegation had no objection to the draft resolution, he wished to point out that the third preambular paragraph informed the international community of the General Assembly's concern about the potentially harmful effects on present and future generations resulting from the levels of radiation to which man was exposed but did not indicate what those levels of radiation actually were. The situation would be aggravated further with the introduction of certain chemical weapons. For that reason, his delegation would like to include in the draft resolution an operative paragraph which would deal with that matter and call upon all interested parties to reduce the levels of radiation to which mankind was exposed.

25. Mr. WARD (New Zealand), speaking in the exercise of the right of reply, referred to the New Zealand report cited by the representative of France and said that although the evidence concerning the non-escape of radio-active material into the atmosphere was convincing, the fact was that no data on the possible damage to the atoll itself and surrounding islands were presented, and therefore his Government renewed its request for information on the subject.

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26. The CHAIRMAN announced that the following countries had joined the sponsors of the draft resolution before the Committee: Chile, Denmark, Fiji, Malaysia, Norway, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uruguay and Venezuela. If there was no objection, he would take it the Committee decided to adopt the draft resolution by consensus.

27. It was so decided.

28. Draft resolution A/SPC/36/L.2 was adopted by consensus.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.