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5th meeting
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Tuesday, 16 October 1979
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 5th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. EL-CHOUFI (Syrian Arab Republic)

later: Mr. TUBMAN (Liberia)

CONTENTS

EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (continued)

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

EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (continued) (A/34/322, A/SPC/34/L.2)

1. The CHAIRMAN announced that the following delegations had become sponsors of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2: Indonesia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Czechoslovakia and Cyprus.
2. Mr. ROSENTHAL (United States of America) recalled that, since the inception of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, United States scientists, together with eminent scientists from other countries, had participated actively in the work, in an effort which constituted an excellent example of international scientific co-operation. His delegation, which was a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2, welcomed the report of the Scientific Committee (A/34/322), which dealt with a number of important topics. Public opinion in the United States was showing increased interest in the effects of radiation, and his delegation was confident that the Scientific Committee's work would help to fill some of the gaps in current knowledge in that area. His delegation also welcomed the Committee's decision to consider the interaction of ionizing radiation with other environmental agents, since so far that area had not been considered in depth. It looked forward to the comprehensive report of the Scientific Committee, which would be presented to the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session. In view of the importance which it attached to the Committee's work, his delegation regretted to note that the Committee was still without a permanent Secretary and urged that that position be filled as soon as possible.
3. Mr. PELAEZ (Peru) announced that his delegation wished to become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2 as a means of contributing to the successful outcome of the work of the Scientific Committee, of which it was a member.
4. His delegation wished to express its concern at attempts which, under the guise of gathering information on atomic radiation from all sources, were designed to conceal a very basic problem, namely the relationship between nuclear explosions and atomic radiation. By directing its efforts towards the study of other sources of radiation, the Committee might lose sight of the essential purpose for which it had been established. He trusted that such an orientation reflected only a concern to carry out comparative studies and not doubts about the harmful effects of nuclear tests on the environment, which were condemned by all humanitarian and peace-loving countries.
5. The Committee was also preparing to study the implementation of certain safety measures designed to reduce the risks of atomic radiation in the light of the recent studies which it had made. While such risks were inherent in both peaceful and military uses of nuclear energy, there was nonetheless a fundamental difference between the ends pursued: man's destruction on the one hand and his well-being on the other. The tremendous potential for the development of the

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(Mr. Pelaez, Peru)

developing countries offered by the peaceful uses of atomic energy, could not be overemphasized. His country's position on that issue was well known: it had, for instance, encouraged the convening, under the auspices of the United Nations, of a conference to promote international co-operation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. It had also become a party to various international instruments governing the use of nuclear energy.

6. In the view of his delegation, the best way to contribute to the general and complete abolition of nuclear activities for military purposes was to promote the dissemination of information which would educate public opinion and encourage peoples and Governments to demonstrate the necessary political will. It would therefore be useful if, in addition to a more instructive report on its work, the Scientific Committee were to publish, with the assistance of the United Nations Department of Public Information, certain data that would be accessible to the public at large. His country, which was deeply concerned about the effects of atomic radiation, was determined to participate in the efforts of the international community to enable mankind to live in peace and prosperity.

7. Mr. BROOK (Australia) welcomed the report of the Scientific Committee and said it was essential that the Committee should pursue its collaboration with other organizations in the United Nations system such as WHO and UNEP. Member States should also provide the Committee with all the scientific data they possessed on radiation and its effects. Nuclear tests, even underground tests, must under no circumstances alter the environment.

8. In order to clarify the text of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2, he proposed that the words "inter alia" should be inserted after the word "reviewing" in the final preambular paragraph. If the sponsors could accept that amendment, his delegation would become a sponsor of the draft resolution.

9. The Australian amendment was adopted.

10. Mr. LUURO (Canada) expressed appreciation for the excellent work done by the Scientific Committee. His Government continued to oppose the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear testing, and was concerned about the real and potential hazards which they posed to human health. His delegation whole-heartedly supported the Committee's activities and encouraged Member States to co-operate with the Committee in order to facilitate its work on its next report. His delegation was committed to playing an active role in the future work of the Committee. In that spirit, it supported the draft resolution as orally amended and hoped that, as at previous sessions, it would be adopted by consensus.

11. Mr. GHAFORZAI (Afghanistan) observed that there were several obvious arguments against nuclear weapons: not only did they strike indiscriminately but they also released radioactivity, the effects of which were uncontrollable in either space or time. That problem was especially serious because atomic radiation was not easily detectable. Nuclear energy was, admittedly, a factor of progress, but it was also an instrument of destruction. The effects of atomic radiation, which were a hazard for all living things, were felt at two levels, somatic and

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(Mr. Ghafoorzai, Afghanistan)

genetic; that was what distinguished nuclear weapons from all other types of weapons.

12. In accordance with its revolutionary principles, his Government was opposed to any measure which endangered the peace, security and prosperity of mankind. It therefore objected strongly to all nuclear tests, wherever they were carried out and whatever their yield. For that reason it had always supported a comprehensive ban on all nuclear testing.

13. One important aspect of the question which concerned the developing countries, in particular, was radiation protection legislation. Any international control must be based on effective national action. In most developing countries, however, radiation protection legislation was incomplete, obsolete or non-existent. Serious consideration must therefore be given to that matter.

14. His delegation endorsed the report of the Scientific Committee and noted with satisfaction that the Committee had been able to work on selected radionuclides. The Committee's success in presenting a comprehensive report to the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session would, however, depend to a large extent on the co-operation of Member States, particularly those which were in a position to provide data on the various sources of radiation. His delegation also wished to emphasize the need to monitor radioactive contamination from nuclear weapon tests and the accompanying risks, as compared with those from other sources of radiation. It hoped that the Committee's work would help to pave the way for a world free of all nuclear testing, in which present and future generations would be able to live in safety.

15. Mr. VUNIBOBO (Fiji) stressed the full significance of the work done by the Scientific Committee since its inception by setting it briefly against the background of the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Some of the subjects under consideration - contamination from nuclear explosions, doses resulting from nuclear power production, and contamination of the environment by caesium-137 - were of special interest to his country. He hoped that the detailed report of the Scientific Committee to the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session would also be accessible to the layman.

16. Off-shore underground tests in the South Pacific posed a very serious threat to the marine life of the region and consequently to the food chain and human health. In that connexion, the Scientific Committee should monitor on a first-hand basis the level of radiation in the area. In addition to underground tests, all nuclear explosions in all environments and at all sites should be halted, since the crucial question was not to monitor fluctuations in the level of radiation, but rather to eliminate any danger of radiation. Accordingly, the argument concerning the maximum permissible levels of exposure to radiation was specious and the attempt by some to determine permissible levels for others was unjustifiable.

17. The evidence made a change of emphasis imperative. It had taken years to assess the after-effects of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and there were still areas of uncertainty. The possibilities of the disposal of nuclear wastes on the sea-bed were a constant source of concern, especially to the island peoples, some of which had had to be resettled because of miscalculations.

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(Mr. Vunibobo, Fiji)

18. Although Fiji would vote in favour of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2, it regretted the omission of specific references to the dangers of all nuclear testing, including underground testing. It was for the nuclear States to eliminate the risks of atomic radiation. Mankind should not be arbitrarily condemned to suffer the effects of the suicidal quest by some countries for nuclear superiority.

19. Mr. LEMNUYEUX-COINENE (France) said that the Scientific Committee was meeting the need of the international scientific community for information and responding to public concerns about possible exposure to radiation from natural or man-made sources. As a member of that Committee since its inception, France had always collaborated with it in full confidence, as it had recently shown at the session held in Vienna. It was prepared to endorse draft resolution A/SPC.34/L.2, now before the Special Political Committee.

20. At the previous meeting, the representative of New Zealand had referred to the alarm caused in the Pacific region in July 1979 by two incidents which had occurred at Mururoa. Contrary to what incomplete information might suggest, the incidents had had no radio-active implications - dispersal of radio-active particles in the atmosphere or of products of fission in the ocean. A statement made in August 1979 by the director of the Christchurch national laboratory had indicated as much. According to the statement, New Zealand monitoring stations at Rarotonga, Samoa, Fiji and Tonga had detected no radio-active fall-out following a nuclear explosion which was reported to have taken place at the end of July at Mururoa. In the first of the incidents referred to by the representative of New Zealand, no nuclear accident had taken place, but an industrial accident, a deflagration in a laboratory resulting from a chemical phenomenon. The fact that the laboratory handled fissile materials had caused concern about possible radio-active contamination in the immediate vicinity. However, a number of persons had been examined and nothing abnormal had been found. In the second incident, it was not a chemical phenomenon, but a purely mechanical one - possibly the collapse of sediment on the underwater slopes of the Mururoa atoll - which had apparently caused a wave approximately 2 metres high to break on the road running through the island. Whether caused naturally or accelerated by a deflagration, that collapse of sediment had in no way degraded the atoll's basaltic subsoil and could not have caused radiation leaks.

21. Since 1974, nuclear tests at Mururoa had been conducted underground in a solid rock (basalt) and at such a depth that experiments five or six times more powerful could be carried out with the normal safeguards. All the underground tests had been kept perfectly under control. The radio-active gases had filtered through successive layers of earth and had been trapped before they could reach the surface. No traces of radionuclides had been found in the ocean, in the immediate vicinity of the atoll or in any living organism of the ocean habitat. The fact that the network of real-time telemetric radiation-monitoring devices installed on the closest inhabited atolls had never detected the slightest trace of radiation clearly proved that those nuclear tests were no danger to the rest of Polynesia. No one had ever challenged the conclusions of the report on the monitoring of radiation which the French Government transmitted every year to the Scientific Committee. A recent report by the Christchurch national radiation laboratory indicated that, since the beginning of underground tests by France at Mururoa, no new product of fission had been detected at the stations installed by the laboratory.

Mr. Tubman (Liberia) took the Chair.

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22. Mr. HILALY (Pakistan) said that, far from being the exclusive province of experts from a few countries, the subject of atomic radiation had become the concern of all mankind. Awareness had been considerably enhanced by the work of the Scientific Committee and, in particular, by the seven excellent reports it had submitted on the subject. Accordingly, States should continue to extend full co-operation to the Scientific Committee by supplying it with the relevant data so essential for its work.

23. Although man had little control over natural irradiation, which was the largest source of radiation, the same could not be said of other sources: medical radiation, radiation-emitting consumer products, radio-active waste, and radiation from nuclear power production or nuclear explosions. The medical uses of radiation, the second largest source, accounted for 19 per cent of the average background dose, as against 0.8 per cent for consumer products and 0.16 per cent for nuclear power production. The percentage attributable to the disposal of nuclear waste was unknown, but was believed to be small. In the light of those figures, the medical profession was beginning to realize the need to be more judicious in the use of radiation treatment. The fact remained, however, that needless recourse to X-rays was widespread. As the Scientific Committee had shown in its 1977 report (A/32/40), the largest potential possibilities of dose reduction were in the medical field. He therefore urged the medical profession in all countries to work towards that end.

24. There was another source of radio-active contamination, the third largest, which could easily be eliminated: contamination caused by nuclear explosions, which, in 1977, had increased world radiation levels by 8 per cent. At the current rate of 250 explosions per year, or one every 32 hours, 500 new explosions would take place before 1981 in addition to the 500 that had already taken place. The report noted that in 1976 radio-activity from nuclear explosions alone had been equivalent to about two years of natural radiation and would be twice as high if the contribution from carbon 14 was included. Yet, the two super-Powers, which continued to develop new nuclear weapons in order to enlarge their arsenals, were responsible for the majority of those explosions. At the same time, they were expressing their concern about disarmament and the problems of radiation in the atmosphere. Their words should be accompanied by action to reduce their military arsenal, agree on procedures to cut off the production of fissionable materials and agree on a comprehensive test ban treaty. Furthermore, no Power had the right to attempt to persuade developing countries to abandon their national programmes for generating power from nuclear fission through a combination of minor incentives and major coercions.

25. The acquisition of nuclear technology and the production of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes was a fundamental imperative for Pakistan. A study conducted in 1972 by the International Atomic Energy Agency showed that by the year 2000 Pakistan would require 27,000 Mw if it was to reach the modest target of 700 Kwh per capita. At present, that figure was 160 Kwh compared with the world average of 1,500 and 10,000 for the United States alone. However, Pakistan's water, coal and gas resources yielded only 11,000 Mw of the total required. Pakistan therefore had to resort to the production of nuclear energy in order to ensure its development. Another matter of concern was that Pakistan's oil import bill had risen from \$60 million in 1973 to \$935 million in 1979; that meant that while the industrialized countries spent a little over 10 per cent of their foreign exchange for oil imports,

(Mr. Hilaly, Pakistan)

Pakistan was forced to consume 43 per cent of its hard currency earnings. Nuclear energy was therefore not merely an option, but a pressing necessity. Yet, despite repeated denials by government authorities, the Western media continued to spread the ludicrous rumour that Pakistan's nuclear programme was oriented towards weapons production.

26. Pakistan had consistently fought against nuclear proliferation. It had supported all disarmament measures, including the creation of nuclear weapon-free zones in both hemispheres and was willing to permit inspection of its nuclear installations on a non-discriminatory and reciprocal basis. It was ironic that the concept of self-reliance to which the representatives of the developed countries paid so much lip service stirred up so much anxiety and was a major cause of concern to those Powers seeking to maintain their monopoly in the nuclear field.

27. The work of the Scientific Committee should be given greater prominence in order to allay public fears concerning the emission of radiation where none existed and to underscore the danger where it did. In that connexion, the draft resolution before the Committee should perhaps include in its text the various sources of radiation and the global dose commitment from each country.

28. Mr. KALINA (Czechoslovakia) welcomed the efforts made by the Scientific Committee to collect and classify the scientific data on the effects of ionizing radiation on humans. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic would continue, within its means, to provide the Scientific Committee with the information at its disposal.

29. The data on radio-active contamination from nuclear explosions published in the past 15 years were convincing and unequivocal evidence of the timeliness of the Moscow Treaty banning nuclear tests and showed the need for continued efforts at the political level. His delegation was convinced that only by concluding a treaty for the general and complete prohibition of nuclear weapons tests could the best results be obtained in that field.

30. His delegation noted with satisfaction that in preparing a detailed report, the Scientific Committee had paid great attention to the effects of radiation with high linear energy output, in particular, neutron irradiation. That type of radiation played a very important role in medicine and in other areas of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, but the terrifying prospects of the use of accelerated neutrons for military purposes could not be overlooked because it represented a significant potential danger of massive irradiation to populations and all living things. Only the process of détente and the banning of nuclear tests would enable the Scientific Committee to devote itself to the scientific explanation of questions directly linked to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and to resolve successfully the major questions of safety and health and protection of the environment. That was all the more important because certain anti-scientific opinions and beliefs were gaining currency.

31. Mr. CANALES (Chile) said that his delegation had always supported the work of the Scientific Committee, which had assumed even greater importance as sources of ionizing radiation, particularly from nuclear tests, had increased.

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(Mr. Canales, Chile)

32. Despite the devastating results of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki more than 30 years ago, the nuclear arms race continued to accelerate, so that the by-product of the destruction caused by any conflict, local or global, would be the incalculable effects of radiation on the few survivors. At the thirty-third session of the General Assembly, a representative group from various sectors and organizations in Japan had visited United Nations Headquarters. It had drawn attention to the risks of nuclear weapons and to the need for urgent measures to protect humans and the environment. The ideal would be to put an end to nuclear tests, which were the greatest source of atomic radiation. The treaty signed between the United States and the USSR limiting the power of such tests to 150 kilotons had not stopped testing below that limit. It was therefore urgent to limit or categorically prohibit nuclear testing, provided that the ban in no way affected the right of States to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. There were various ways of co-operating in that field at the international level, for example, through IAEA.

33. His delegation had carefully read the report of the Scientific Committee and looked forward to its next report with interest. It welcomed the interest shown in the work of the Committee by various bodies and organizations such as IAEA, FAO, UNEP and WHO as well as ICRP and ICRU. In that connexion, it noted with satisfaction that UNEP would benefit from the studies by the Committee on the effects and risks of ionizing radiation from all sources. Chile would support any measure to give the results of the Committee's work the widest publicity, not only in the scientific community, but also among the public at large.

34. His delegation had become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2.

35. Mrs. NOWOTNY (Austria) said that atomic radiation was a disquieting and alarming phenomenon for all States. The progress of science and technology had uncovered a wide field of application for nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, raising the problem of the safety of nuclear power plants and the disposal of nuclear wastes. The contamination resulting from radiological procedures and the radiation to which workers could be exposed on the job, however slight and negligible they might seem, represented a potential threat to the genetic structure of man and the human environment.

36. In view of the magnitude of the problem, Austria was gratified by the work carried out by international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and by independent expert groups such as the Scientific Committee. Austria welcomed the close co-operation between the Committee and UNEP and IAEA. Austria was not a member of the Committee but was honoured to host the secretariat of the Committee, which held its meetings at Vienna, because that enabled Austria to make a modest contribution to its task.

37. Her delegation had become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2 as it had been amended by Australia.

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38. Mr. TOMA (Samoa) expressed appreciation of the report of the Scientific Committee, and support for its work. His country viewed with apprehension the continuation of nuclear tests, which it regarded as totally unnecessary, but, in view of the insistence of certain States on proceeding with testing, it hoped that adequate precautions, including monitoring, would be taken and that the potential dangers associated with such tests and other nuclear activities would be thoroughly examined and fully reported. The peoples of the South Pacific were particularly sensitive about those matters, because nuclear testing activities, the safety of which could never be guaranteed, had been carried out in their region over the past 15 years. It was therefore incumbent on all countries to supply full information, in order not only to allay the legitimate fears of people in general but also to facilitate the scientific work of the competent international bodies.

39. While he was grateful to the representative of France for the explanations which he had given, he pointed out that recent incidents at the nuclear testing site in French Polynesia had created even more uneasiness among the people of the South Pacific. If those activities were to continue, against the wishes of those peoples, as had been the case, it was essential, in order to allay their fears, that those carrying them out should permit a full and impartial assessment of any mishaps.

40. Samoa had become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2.

41. Mrs. SUKADI (Indonesia) said that she hoped that an increasing number of Governments would provide information to facilitate the task of the Scientific Committee, including the preparation of a scientific annex which it intended to submit with its report to the General Assembly at the thirty-sixth session. The report should cover such questions as the dose-response ratio at low doses of radiation, the genetic effects of radiation, synergism between radiation and other environmental agents, the non-stochastic effects of radiation, sources of radiation and the corresponding human exposures and analyses of the models for assessing radiation dose, including the question of the interaction of ionizing radiation with other agents encountered in the environment.

42. Her delegation attached great importance to the work of the Scientific Committee and its efforts to further the knowledge and understanding of the risks of atomic radiation. It believed that the Scientific Committee had an important mission to fulfil, particularly in the dissemination of its findings to the world at large. For all those reasons, Indonesia had become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2.

43. Mr. REMEDI (Uruguay) stressed the particular importance which Uruguay attached to the problems of atomic radiation, because the future of the human race was threatened by mutations similar to those observed in the animal world resulting from chemical pollution. After reading the report of the Scientific Committee, his delegation felt that extreme precautions should be taken and that they should be adapted in the light of the present state of scientific knowledge; at the same time, precautions should also be taken in areas where knowledge was incomplete.

44. His delegation noted with satisfaction that the Scientific Committee was to submit a report to the General Assembly at its thirty-sixth session and believed that if it was given wide publicity, people would be better informed about the harmful effects of atomic radiation. Uruguay had also become a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2.

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45. Mr. TRAUTWEILL (Federal Republic of Germany) proposed that, at the end of the second preambular paragraph of the draft resolution, an asterisk should be inserted referring to a foot-note giving the document symbol of the report of the Scientific Committee (A/34/322).

46. Draft resolution A/SPC/34/L.2, as amended by Australia and the Federal Republic of Germany, was adopted without a vote.

47. Mr. FRANCIS (New Zealand), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the report on environmental radio-activity for 1978, which had been published in New Zealand and to which the representative of France had referred, did not cover the period during which the incidents had occurred; like the other reports published on the subject by New Zealand since 1971, it was available to the Scientific Committee. New Zealand's monitoring programme dealt only with the atmosphere and radio-active fall-out in the atmosphere, and the report mentioned by the representative of France concerned atmospheric monitoring operations carried out in New Zealand and in five Pacific islands in 1978, not in 1979, whereas the incidents which had caused widespread concern in the Pacific had occurred in July 1979 at Mururoa. He added that, in his earlier statement, he had been talking about the marine environment and the fact that it was impossible for New Zealand to detect the presence of fissionable material in the ocean, where the rapid rate of dissolution required frequent samplings in the immediate vicinity of the test site, which the New Zealand research laboratory was not in a position to do. New Zealand would therefore like to have some details about the French monitoring programme.

48. The CHAIRMAN announced that, because the names of some speakers had been inadvertently omitted in the summary of the preceding meeting in the Journal, a corrigendum would be published. The Committee had now completed its consideration of item 47. At its next meeting it would begin consideration of item 40, which would start by having the Commissioner-General introduce the report on the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.