

UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

FORTY-SIXTH SESSION

Official Records

SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
4th meeting
held on
Thursday, 10 October 1991
at 10 a.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 4th MEETING

Chairman:

Mr. PIBULSONGGRAM

(Thailand)

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Distr. GENERAL
A/SPC/46/SR.4
17 October 1991
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 70: EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (continued) (A/46/218 and A/SPC/46/L.2)

1. Ms. BIRD (Australia) said that her country, one of the sponsors of the draft resolution contained in document A/SPC/46/L.2, had been a member of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation since its establishment in 1955. Referring to the major reports of the Committee, she said that they contained authoritative and up-to-date interpretation of radiation sources and effects and a vast amount of reliable scientific detail. Given the difficulty of the material, however, her delegation renewed its suggestion that the Secretariat could prepare a simplified version of those reports for the public containing less specialized technical information. That had been done following the publication of the 1982 report, and that version was currently in use in institutions of higher education in Australia as an excellent introduction in the training of radiographers, nurses and other paramedical staff.

2. Australia had consistently maintained that the work of the Committee should not be seen in scientific isolation, but in relation to a world over-armed with nuclear weapons. The Australian Government was firmly committed to the objective of complete nuclear disarmament under effective international control. It had consistently urged States possessing nuclear arsenals to reduce them in order to achieve complete nuclear disarmament. Therefore it warmly welcomed the United States' recent offer to initiate a significant cut in nuclear arms and the Soviet Union's positive response including their decision to suspend nuclear testing for one year. Her delegation hoped that the other nuclear Powers would respond to those decisions in a similar spirit.

3. Referring to the Treaty of Rarotonga, which had established a large area of the South Pacific as a nuclear-free zone, she said that it reflected the concerns of countries in the region about the nuclear-arms race, continued nuclear testing in the region and proposals to dump nuclear waste in the South Pacific. It was disappointing that the three Protocols to the Treaty, which had been ratified by the Soviet Union and China, had still not been signed or ratified by the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

4. Its third protocol constituted an undertaking not to test any explosive device within the area covered by the nuclear-free zone. The countries in the region remained deeply concerned that French nuclear testing continued there. Australia was opposed in principle to nuclear testing and considered that France's decision to join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty constituted a further reason to stop such testing. Australia and the countries of the South Pacific had called on France many times to cease its nuclear testing programme in the South Pacific and believed that, if France insisted that such a programme was necessary, it should be conducted in metropolitan France.

5. Mr. SHIGEIE (Japan) said that nuclear energy and related technologies were becoming an increasingly important part of daily life and, consequently, the need to guard against the potentially harmful effects of such technology became all the greater. The dangers of atomic radiation affected everyone, and that threat bound all people together as a truly global community. Because the threat was global, the response must be global as well.

6. The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation played an invaluable role as a forum for scientific cooperation in gathering and disseminating accurate information. Efforts to protect mankind and the environment from the harmful effects of atomic radiation must be based on purely scientific and technical information.

7. As a member country, Japan had attached great importance to the work of the Committee and found its activities both informative and of great practical use. Japan reaffirmed its continued support and cooperation in promoting the work of the Committee. It also urged Member States, the International Atomic Energy Agency and other specialized agencies to continue their cooperation with the Committee and to provide it with all relevant information. His delegation also hoped that the Special Political Committee would reaffirm its support for the work of the Scientific Committee by adopting the resolution contained in document A/SPC/46/L.2 by consensus.

8. Mr. ZVONKO (Belarus) said that Belarus, which was the new name of his country, believed that the problem of nuclear radiation was an extremely serious matter. Having suffered direct consequences from the Chernobyl disaster, it recognized the importance of the work of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation.

9. The Chernobyl catastrophe had had consequences not only for Belarus, but for many other countries as well. Radioactivity from Chernobyl had been observed in wild birds found far from the European continent. There had also been transboundary atmospheric contamination and possible transmission of contamination by water.

10. He agreed in general with the observations in paragraph 6 of document A/46/218, listing the Committee's recommendations and conclusions. The Government of Belarus believed that the project mentioned in that paragraph was a first step in the study of the many problems caused by the Chernobyl disaster. However, given the short time period allocated to the project, it had been difficult to obtain complete information. Furthermore, the data offered by experts was insufficient to reflect the real situation. He was concerned by the excessively optimistic tone of the project and, in that respect, observed that the effects of radiation were being re-examined. There was a lack of reliable data on the possibility of contracting chronic illnesses and on the effects of low-level doses of radiation. The other harmful effects of industrial waste were not well known, either, as had been recognized by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization.

(Mr. Zvonko, Belarus)

11. In Belarusian scientific circles, it was felt that the results of the international project on Chernobyl were based on data applicable to small population group that was not homogeneous and they did not take into account variations in isotope composition. Furthermore, the influence of prevailing harmful conditions on the future health of the population had not been considered. There was also a lack of information on the populations which had suffered the most, especially children evacuated from areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster.

12. In 1990, the delegation of Belarus had said that it was willing to cooperate actively with the Committee and would also be willing to become a member. Consultations were continuing on that matter. His country, because of the special knowledge it had gained since the Chernobyl catastrophe, could make a significant contribution to the Committee.

13. Mr. ZAWELS (Argentina) said that paragraph 3 of the report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation described the extensive and important agenda considered by the Committee, and the sources of natural or man-made radiation that produced effects which had direct or indirect consequences for human beings.

14. The Chernobyl accident continued to demonstrate the magnitude of the damage caused and the need to redouble efforts to prevent a repetition of that disaster. He referred to the important agreements reached by the United States and the Soviet Union with regard to nuclear weapons, and to the unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests declared by the Soviet Union.

15. Argentina attached great importance to the peaceful uses of atomic energy. As an example, he referred to his country's National Atomic Energy Commission which, among other activities, was carrying out two programmes related to that question: the first, the radioisotopes and radiation programme, was intended to develop and promote the use of radioisotopes and ionizing radiation in the various activities associated with health, industrial and agricultural production and research.

16. The second programme, on radiological protection and nuclear safety, was intended to ensure adequate protection of the public, workers in the nuclear industry, and the environment. In that connection, he drew attention to the agreement signed by Argentina and Brazil in August 1991, on the exclusively peaceful use of nuclear energy. Negotiations had also begun between those two countries and the International Atomic Energy Agency on a safeguard agreement permitting the Agency to inspect Argentine and Brazilian nuclear installations with a view to ensuring that the two countries' nuclear programmes were used for purely peaceful purposes.

17. Lastly, he said that his country was a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/46/L.2, which he hoped that the Committee would adopt.

18. Mr. MEHRA (India) said that his country attached great importance to the exclusively peaceful uses of nuclear energy for the benefit of its people. The prime objective of India's atomic energy programme, as defined in the 1948 Atomic Energy Act, was the development, control and use of atomic energy solely for peaceful purposes.

19. Tragic accidents like the one at Chernobyl in 1986 could not be forgotten. He noted that India had pledged assistance amounting to \$250,000 towards relief for the victims of the Chernobyl disaster. Similarly, India, which was fully aware of the need to maintain the highest nuclear safety standards, had closely cooperated with the Scientific Committee, and had participated actively in its annual meetings in Vienna and in the preparation of its annual reports.

20. In the context of the Committee's requirements for more extensive data for radiation exposure evaluations and other studies, his delegation hoped that Member States, the specialized agencies and the organizations of the United Nations system would continue to make available information pertinent to the valuable studies and research carried out by the Scientific Committee.

21. The annual report submitted by the Scientific Committee revealed its important and fruitful work in the fields of radiation exposure and the risks resulting from such exposure. He repeated that India would cooperate fully with the Committee in its efforts.

22. Mr. DONG Jianlong (China) said that the potential effects of atomic radiation on man and the environment were among the major issues of current concern. Bearing in mind that decisions to be adopted in the future on many significant issues would be based on a comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the known scientific facts in that field, the work done by the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation to examine and compile information on the subject assumed paramount importance. The Scientific Committee had included in its programme of work issues of great technical complexity which had a direct impact on man and the environment, such as the environmental effects of radiation and perception of the dangers resulting from radiation exposure, and had also dealt with various aspects of the effects of low-level radiation, thereby increasing people's overall understanding of the effects of atomic radiation.

23. Lastly, China, a sponsor of the draft resolution presented by the delegation of Belgium (A/SPC/46/L.2), expressed the hope that the Scientific Committee would continue its work with the support of all the organs and agencies concerned in the United Nations system.

24. Mr. PAULSEN (Chile) said that his country could not remain indifferent to the results of the studies by the Scientific Committee, which over the years had managed to compile a valuable body of information on the question of atomic radiation, thereby contributing to a better awareness of the danger posed by atomic radiation for present and future generations.

(Mr. Paulsen, Chile)

25. Chile had joined those countries that were members of the Permanent Commission for the South Pacific in conveying to the United Nations its concern at and categorical rejection of the nuclear tests carried out by France at Mururoa atoll. During 1991 Chile had had to convey letters of protest to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on six occasions. The experiments constituted a serious threat to the marine environment, natural resources and the ecosystem as a whole, as well as affecting the health of the inhabitants of the areas adjacent to the tests.

26. Nuclear tests, regardless of who carried them out, violated the basic rules of justice. In that regard, it was to be noted that the countries affected had not given their consent to the conducting of those experiments. Chile considered that the concept of national security adduced by some nuclear Powers in order to justify their nuclear-test programmes had a much broader dimension, for it was obvious that there would be no security without an environment free from atomic radiation.

27. Chile congratulated the Scientific Committee on the studies and assessments it had made concerning the tragic accident at Chernobyl in 1986, and shared the hope that the international conference to conclude the project and the report to be published would clarify the scientific issues and lead to better public understanding of the accident and its consequences.

28. Lastly, Chile called upon the international community to continue to monitor the effects of atomic radiation and urged the countries possessing nuclear technology to focus their activities on greater cooperation in the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes with a view to ensuring international peace and security and full compliance with the Charter.

29. Mr. BOUTSKO (Ukraine) drew members' attention to the declaration by the Ukrainian Supreme Parliament on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, in which it was stated that more than 2 million persons, 116 districts, towns, wooded and cultivated areas, rivers and the atmosphere had been threatened by radiation. At present it was very difficult to find anyone in Ukraine who was not marked by the pain of that national tragedy, the consequences of which had still not been explained or fully understood.

30. That situation was attributable to the fact that, according to the experts, further consequences would become apparent in 10 or 15 years' time, or even later. However, there was already a perceptible increase in cancers, particularly of the thyroid gland, and of leukaemia among children, as well as a psychological and physical deterioration among the inhabitants of the areas affected.

31. His country noted with satisfaction the activities related to the Chernobyl tragedy carried out by the United Nations specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization

(Mr. Boutsko, Ukraine)

(UNIDO), and in particular by the group of international experts of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which had studied the consequences of the disaster and analysed the measures taken. Ukraine considered that the solutions proposed to alleviate the effects of radiation were positive, but it did not entirely concur with the conclusions of the study with regard to health, given the limited territorial and temporal scope of the research done. The studies done by Ukrainian scientists over the last five years had come up with far from optimistic results that differed from the conclusions of the study by the international experts. Unfortunately, no study had been carried out on the 600,000 persons who had assisted in the evacuation and the 100,000 persons who had returned to settle in the region and had been exposed to significant radiation doses.

32. Another issue of concern to Ukraine was the effect of the doses of radiation, small but significant as regards their consequences for the thyroid gland, to which 8,000 children had been exposed. In 1990, subsequent to the departure of the foreign experts, the Institute of Endocrinology of Ukraine had discovered 20 cases of thyroid cancer in children, compared with one or two cases recorded annually in the past. The diagnosis had been questioned by the experts and so the Institute had referred the cases to Washington, where the diagnosis was confirmed.

33. In view of the complexity of the situation, Ukraine considered that the studies which had been carried out represented the first stage of a wider effort of international cooperation, which would include in-depth analysis of the effects of the radiation. Ukraine was therefore prepared to collaborate with international experts in various areas and in particular in the field of health.

34. On 24 August 1991 the Supreme Parliament of Ukraine had passed a law in which it had declared independence and established a State of Ukraine. On 1 December 1991 a referendum would be held which was certain to endorse that decision, since the population was unwilling to relive the errors of the past and wished to be masters of their own land and of their own country and to ensure its well-being, tranquillity and stability.

35. Mr. POSSO (Ecuador) said that a complete understanding of the pernicious effects of nuclear radiation on human beings was certainly needed in order to be able to engage in cooperation with Governments and specialized organizations in the search for effective scientific and medical responses which would make it possible to combat the illnesses caused by exposure to nuclear radiation. More specific knowledge must also be acquired regarding all sources of radioactive contamination and their effects in different environments and in multiple exposures.

36. The delicate nature of the materials used in nuclear plants carried with it the risk of fatal accidents, and while the total elimination of such accidents might be regarded as an unrealistic objective, all appropriate precautions could be taken to guard against their harmful effects.

(Mr. Posso, Ecuador)

37. Ecuador considered that it was vital to promote international cooperation, as the effects of atomic radiation were so serious and extensive that no country, however developed, would be able to apply all the necessary safeguards and preventive measures. Likewise the close association of the nuclear sciences with modern life and the vulnerability of human beings and the environment to nuclear radiation constituted a further argument in favour of international cooperation,

38. Ecuador welcomed the links between the Scientific Committee and other bodies of the system, in particular the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), since it was clear that there was a relationship between the current needs of mankind, the need to preserve and protect the environment and the insistent demand of the peoples of the world for protection from catastrophes occurring as a result of nuclear accidents and for the provision of appropriate means of dealing with the risks to health and well-being caused by atomic radiation.

39. A crucial issue as far as Ecuador and other developing countries were concerned was the need to secure the complete cessation of irresponsible nuclear testing, which his country had sought, together with the members of the Permanent Commission of the South Pacific Conference and other nations equally threatened by such practices, in all the forums of the international community. The environmental damage caused by such tests and their secondary effects were beyond dispute; nevertheless, each year protests were made which were either ignored or, at best, simply registered by the international community without any further show of support for a persistent real and fully justified concern.

40. Ecuador was not opposed to the increasingly common practice of using nuclear power as a complementary or alternative energy source, but firmly maintained that the increasingly pressing need for safe management of sources of atomic energy to be guaranteed should be borne in mind, and reaffirmed the fundamental principle that nuclear power should be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and to support the integral development of peoples.

41. Lastly, Ecuador supported the draft resolution (A/SPC/46/L.2) proposed by Belgium.

42. Mr. FAZL-I-MAHMOOD (Pakistan) said that the developments which had transformed international relations and ushered in an era of mutual cooperation provided a conducive setting in which to approach constructively the problem of atomic radiation and the threat it posed to humanity. In that respect, Pakistan welcomed the announcement by President Bush of the United States of America of the unilateral elimination of land- and sea-based tactical nuclear weapons and the decision of the Soviet Union to reciprocate with similar measures.

43. With the objective of keeping South Asia free of nuclear weapons, the Prime Minister of Pakistan had recently called for consultations between the

(Mr. Fazl-I-Mahmood, Pakistan)

United States, the Soviet Union, China, India and Pakistan to ensure the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region. A concerted effort needed to be made to prohibit all types of nuclear explosion. In that context, Pakistan welcomed the initiative of President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union by which that country would unilaterally refrain from nuclear testing for an initial period of one year. For its part, Pakistan supported the early conclusion of a comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and similar regional and bilateral agreements, since such measures would not only reduce the threat of nuclear contamination of the environment but would also strengthen efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

44. Pakistan was opposed to the application of discriminatory, inequitable and selective restrictions on the transfer of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, since neither logic nor reason supported the assumption by certain nations that nuclear technology was a panacea for a select few and not beneficial for other nations.

45. If nuclear mishaps and resultant devastation were to be averted, it was imperative that the industrialized countries and the developing countries should jointly endeavour to achieve that objective within a rational and equitable framework. The tragic accident at Chernobyl illustrated the need for greater international cooperation in that field.

46. The world faced two problems, of shrinking energy resources and serious environmental degradation caused by the use of fossil fuels. For countries such as Pakistan which were confronted with the problem of an acute shortage of conventional fuels and energy resources, the transfer of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes was indispensable, while it also had other applications in the medical and scientific fields.

47. In that context, the industrialized countries must extend assistance to developing countries in the maintenance of nuclear reactors that they had exported, and refrain from prohibiting the sale of vital spare parts. Concern over nuclear non-proliferation should not therefore serve as a pretext for depriving developing countries of safety-related information on nuclear installations on a discriminatory basis. That was an approach which ran counter to international concerns over the dangerous effects of atomic radiation and the potentially disastrous consequences of a possible accident in a nuclear installation. In that respect, his delegation noted that the International Atomic Energy Agency had taken an important lead in order to help ensure the continued flow of safety-related information, and hoped that that process would be further expanded with the objective of achieving adequate safety standards in nuclear installations world wide.

40. It was extremely important to protect nuclear installations from armed attacks, the consequences of which could obviously be disastrous. An important step in that direction had been taken in South Asia with the

(Mr. ~~Fazl-I-Mahmood, Pakistan~~)

signature by India and Pakistan on 31 December 1988 of the Islamabad Agreement prohibiting attacks on each other's nuclear installations. Instruments of ratification had since been exchanged.

49. In conclusion, his delegation wished to commend the Scientific Committee for its valuable work in the field of ionizing radiation and its effects on human life and the environment, and looked forward with interest to the conclusions of the study currently being conducted by the Committee on medical and occupational exposures to radiation. It also welcomed the increased cooperation between the Committee and UNEP and other specialized bodies, and urged continued support for the Committee to enable it to fulfil its important tasks.

50. Mr. MAREHALAU (Federated States of Micronesia), speaking on behalf of the nine nations of the South Pacific Forum - Australia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu - said that although the South Pacific region seemed far removed from global problems, it was subject to a significant number of environmental threats, including global warming and climate change. In addition, the potential impact of atomic radiation on the region, where a nuclear testing programme had been carried out over the past three decades, was a matter of concern. Tests conducted in the period up to 1974 had resulted in a dramatic increase in the levels of artificial radiation, and in particular of Strontium 90 and Caesium 137, which had serious effects on human health. Radiation levels had declined since the termination of atmospheric testing in 1974, but the longer-term effects of such radiation would have to be continuously monitored.

51. The South Pacific Forum was also concerned about the continuation by France of an underground nuclear testing programme in the Tuamotu Archipelago to the east of the Cook Islands. In the communiqué contained in the annex to document A/46/344 the Forum had expressed its deep dismay at the French Government's statement that its nuclear testing programme in the South Pacific would not be affected by its decision to become a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Forum had reiterated its firm and unceasing opposition to nuclear testing in the region. In that regard the Forum had agreed to give consideration to an expanded programme of opposition to France's nuclear testing in the region. It had suggested that the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme should play a central role in monitoring and evaluating the environmental impact of nuclear testing in the region. The short message of the Forum communiqué was that French nuclear testing must be firmly opposed until France ceased its nuclear testing programme. While a recent analysis undertaken by the International Atomic Energy Agency at Mururoa had concluded that there was no evidence of significant radiation levels, given the fragile atoll environment in which the nuclear tests were carried out it was impossible to accept uncritically any assurances regarding the overall safety of the testing programme.

(Mr. Marehalau, Federated
States of Micronesia)

52. The underground cavities at Mururoa contained the poisonous remains of over 100 nuclear explosions, equivalent to 100 Hiroshima bombs. Given the long life of radioactive materials, there could be no guarantee that they would stay forever sealed within the atoll without polluting the outside environment. Despite claims by France about the safety of its nuclear testing programme, neither the Atkinson Report of 1983 nor the United Nations Comprehensive Study on Nuclear Weapons ruled out the possibility of accidental damage or longer-term release of atomic radiation.

53. In the broader context, the South Pacific countries' steadfast opposition to nuclear testing of any sort was based on other considerations as well as those of an environmental nature. It was the embodiment of their strongly held view that there was simply no place for nuclear weapons in their region. Hence the importance they attached to the early achievement of a Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, the support they gave to nuclear disarmament efforts and non-proliferation and their opposition to proposals to dump nuclear waste in their region. All those concerns were reflected in international and regional forums and in various regional arrangements.

54. Mr. STEFANINI (France), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the representatives of Australia, Chile and the Federated States of Micronesia, in their statements, had questioned the nuclear testing carried out by his country in French Polynesia.

55. In order to maintain an independent defence system, France had no alternative but to maintain a deterrent capacity which, to be credible, must incorporate all the necessary technical advances. For that reason, France had to pursue its nuclear testing as and when required by technological needs. It was precisely in relation to those requirements that France had decided to reduce the number of tests from eight to six a year.

56. The nuclear testing was carried out in a part of French territory which was eminently suitable - especially geographically - for carrying out experiments, which were always underground and would not endanger the interests of the States of the region, the health of the people living there, or the environment.

57. That had been freely verified in the field by a number of international scientific missions during the past 10 years. The most recent mission for comparing radioactivity measurements had been carried out in March 1991 by three different laboratories concurrently, one of them from the International Atomic Energy Agency. The results would be published shortly under the auspices of the Agency. The measurements carried out by those missions showed that there was no difference between the quality or level of artificial radioactivity in the approaches to the Mururoa and Fangataufa sites and those existing in the South Pacific or the South Atlantic.

(Mr. Stefanini, France)

58. What was more, France's policy of transparency and dialogue was not merely a matter of receiving scientific missions; it involved an annual report by the Secretary-General on the number and date of nuclear tests, an annual report by the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, an invitation to French and foreign personalities to visit the site, and, since May 1990, a report after every test on the capacity of the device used and the setting up of a permanent observatory for monitoring the environment in the South Pacific. Not many States were so open on that subject.

59. When General Assembly resolution 44/119 was adopted, France had recorded the reasons why it had not been able to comply with the obligations of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga). France's position in that respect had not changed.

60. Ms. BIRD (Australia), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that, as explained earlier, she did not agree with the representative of France that his country's nuclear testing had no long-term effects on the environment.

61. However, Australia's position was based not only on environmental considerations but also on its opposition to nuclear testing in any region, as was clear from its support for a comprehensive treaty on the prohibition of nuclear testing. Her Government therefore welcomed the announcement of the Governments of the United States of America and the Soviet Union and hoped that progress would be made towards the destruction of nuclear arsenals and the reduction of nuclear testing.

62. The CHAIRMAN said that a decision would have to be taken on the draft resolution in document A/SPC/46/L.2, whose sponsors had now been joined by Canada, Costa Rica, India, New Zealand, Portugal and Spain. If there were no objections, he would take it that the Committee wished to adopt the draft resolution without a vote.

63. The draft resolution in document A/SPC/46/L.2 was adopted by consensus.

64. The CHAIRMAN said that the Committee had concluded its discussion of agenda item 70. It would in due course submit a report on the subject to the General Assembly.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.