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Chairman:

Mr. KARUKUBIRO-KAMUNANWIRE

(Uganda)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 72: EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (A/45/319)

1. Mr. SMERAL (Czechoslovakia) said that after long years Czechoslovakia was participating in the current session of the General Assembly as a member of the family of democratic States, having completely rid itself of all vestiges of the old ideological clichés. His delegation was taking a fresh look at a number of international issues, an approach which was also reflected in its work at the current session of the General Assembly. At the same time, it was aware that there were questions, especially of a scientific nature, where Czechoslovak specialists had achieved successes, even under the conditions of the former totalitarian régime, which could provide a basis for current activities. That was particularly true of Czechoslovakia's membership of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation.

2. Czechoslovakia had been a member of the Scientific Committee since its establishment in 1955, and Czechoslovak scientists had assumed their responsibilities in that sphere in full awareness of the fundamental importance of the issue for the whole planet. Czechoslovakia had a high opinion of the role of the Special Committee in promoting human health and protecting the environment, in particular by drawing the attention of Member States to the imperative need to end nuclear-weapon tests in the atmosphere. The Scientific Committee's endeavours had led to the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and under Water, signed at Moscow in 1963.

3. In recent years, the Scientific Committee's activities had focused on a range of questions relating to the use of radiation in medicine, nuclear-energy programmes and seepages of radon and related products, and attention had also been devoted to new discoveries in the field of prenatal defects (especially of the brain) in the radiation-affected populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The detailed scientific evaluation of the consequences of the radiation emitted in the Chernobyl nuclear accident was also significant.

4. Over the previous year his Government had contributed to the activities of the Scientific Committee by making available processed data on the exposure of citizens and medical personnel in diagnostic and therapeutic uses of ionization in Czechoslovakia. It would provide data during the current year on radio-nuclides released into the atmosphere by Czechoslovak nuclear reactors. As a demonstration of Czechoslovakia's full support for the Scientific Committee's activities, it was a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/45/L.2, and firmly believed that the draft would be adopted by consensus.

5. Mr. VAN LIEROP (Vanuatu), speaking as Chairman of the South Pacific Forum regional organization on behalf of Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Solomon Islands, as well as Vanuatu, said that to outsiders the South Pacific might appear an unspoiled maritime setting far removed from global problems. Yet such a view ignored the enormous environmental threats posed in the

(Mr. Van Lierop, Vanuatu)

region by global warming and climate changes, as well as the potential impact of atomic radiation caused by nuclear testing over the previous three decades.

6. The atmospheric nuclear tests carried out until 1974 had resulted in a significant increase in artificial radiation levels, particularly of strontium-90 and caesium-137, with menacing effects on human health. While those levels had declined with the termination of atmospheric testing, it was known from the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that there would be a need for continued monitoring of the longer-term effects of such radiation.

7. The concerns of the member countries of the South Pacific Forum were being exacerbated by France's continuation of its underground nuclear-testing programme in the Tuamotu Archipelago, to the east of the Cook Islands, in total disregard of calls by the countries of the region for an end to testing.

8. France continued to maintain that its nuclear-testing programme was safe. Given the fragile environment of the atolls on which tests were carried out, it was impossible to accept such assurances. How could anyone claim, let alone guarantee, that there was no contamination, when the underground cavities at Mururoa contained the poisonous radioactive debris of over 100 nuclear explosions? What assurances were there that the debris would remain forever sealed within the atoll, without contaminating the outside environment over the long life of the radioactive materials, equivalent to 100 bombs of the type dropped at Hiroshima? The destructive power of cumulative nuclear explosions on the physical structure of Mururoa atoll should not be underestimated. The fact that in 1989 and 1990 France had decided to carry out tests at Fangataufa was evidence that the French Government itself recognized that Mururoa's capacity to contain such explosions had diminished. Moreover, there was no specific evidence by any scientific mission proving the safety of nuclear tests, as France had recently claimed once again before the General Assembly. The United Nations nuclear-weapon study, soon to be issued, made the point that there could be no guarantee against the environmental impact of the accidental or the long-term release of atomic radiation.

9. The steadfast opposition of the Governments and peoples of the South Pacific to nuclear testing was not based only on environmental concerns and their livelihood, but on the strongly held view that there was simply no place for nuclear weapons in the South Pacific region or in any other part of the world. It was also consistent with the call they had made for the urgent conclusion of a comprehensive test-ban treaty, the importance they attached to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation and their opposition to proposals to dump nuclear waste in the region. All those concerns had been voiced by South Pacific States in all appropriate international forums and were reflected in various regional arrangements.

10. In short, the continuance of France's nuclear-weapon programme in the region was an insult to the wishes of the region's inhabitants and denigrated the validity and integrity of regionalism among the Pacific island Governments. Half measures or declarations like those made by France during the past year that the number of

(Mr. Van Lierop, Vanuatu)

nuclear tests would be reduced from eight to six on economic grounds were not enough. The member States of the South Pacific Forum simply demanded that France should cease nuclear testing in their region.

11. Mrs. SINHA (India) said that the prime objective of India's atomic energy programme was the development, control and use of atomic energy solely for peaceful purposes, namely, the generation of electricity and the development of nuclear applications in research, agriculture, industry, medicine and other fields. India had always been dedicated to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and it regarded science and technology as a means to accelerate economic development.

12. The tragic accident at Chernobyl in 1986 was a reminder of the terrible consequences that ionizing radiation could have for man and his environment. India was aware of the need to maintain the highest nuclear safety standards, and had closely co-operated with the Scientific Committee by participating actively in the Committee's annual sessions and in other international meetings and conferences on that issue.

13. Her delegation hoped that the Member States, the specialized agencies and the organizations of the United Nations system, as well as other national and international scientific bodies, would continue to make pertinent information available to the Scientific Committee for its studies and research. She appreciated the Scientific Committee's excellent annual report, which was a reflection of its important and fruitful work. Her delegation was confident that the Scientific Committee would continue to fulfil its functions successfully, and reiterated that India would continue to co-operate with its efforts.

14. Mr. BUGTI (Pakistan) expressed his delegation's appreciation of the Scientific Committee's work over the previous 35 years. In co-ordination with other United Nations organizations, particularly the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), that Committee had made a valuable contribution to scientific understanding of ionizing radiation, radioactivity and its effects on human health and the environment.

15. In an era of increasing usage of radiation for medical purposes, his delegation commended the Scientific Committee's distribution of a questionnaire on medical radiation usage as a timely step in highlighting the safety aspects of such usage.

16. However, his delegation felt that the only means of preserving the global environment from the risks of future contamination was to support a moratorium on all types of nuclear explosions, without exception. Pakistan was prepared to subscribe to a comprehensive test-ban treaty on a global, regional or bilateral level, in order to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Countries that applied discriminatory, inequitable and selective restrictions should carefully reflect on the possible consequences of their actions, which could prove counter-productive.

(Mr. Bugti, Pakistan)

17. He strongly emphasized the need to protect nuclear installations from armed attack. Pakistan and India had taken the lead in that regard by signing an agreement in Islamabad on 31 December 1988. That agreement constituted a significant confidence-building measure that would have a stabilizing effect on the situation in South Asia.

18. There was an urgent need to devise a rational and equitable system of co-operation to forestall the grave danger of damage to nuclear facilities. Industrialized countries must assist developing countries in maintaining reactors exported by the former, and must refrain from prohibiting the supply of vital spare parts. His delegation also opposed undue restrictions on the transfer of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, which was indispensable for developing countries faced with an acute shortage of conventional fuels and other energy sources. In Pakistan, for example, there was a projected shortage within the next 10 years of 8,000 megawatts of power, and nuclear energy was the only solution.

19. He regretted that certain countries, on the pretext of preventing nuclear proliferation, had withheld safety information from nuclear plants on a discriminatory basis, without regard to the potentially disastrous consequences of nuclear accidents in densely populated areas. The ramifications of an accident would be felt not only in the surrounding area but in distant regions and countries as well. However, he noted that the situation had somewhat improved, and that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had made a creditable effort to ensure the continued flow of safety-related information.

20. Considering the importance of the Scientific Committee's work, his delegation urged that suitable resources should be provided to that Committee so that it could continue its important and useful task and its valuable contribution to the understanding of the effects of radiation.

21. Ms. BIRD (Australia) said that Australia had been a member of the Scientific Committee since its establishment in 1955, and that it had also had the honour of chairing the Committee for the previous two years. It was pleased to co-sponsor draft resolution A/SPC/45/L.2. The Scientific Committee was a small, technical body which, for 35 years, had efficiently studied and disseminated data on levels of ionizing radiation and radioactivity in the environment, as well as on the risks of various types of harm caused by radiation, both short-term and long-term, to individuals and future generations.

22. One of the Scientific Committee's most difficult tasks was the continuing evaluation of the radiobiological effects of ionizing radiation at low doses. The major reports produced by the Committee at three- to five-year intervals fulfilled a very important function by reporting on radiation sources and effects, and contained a vast amount of reliable scientific detail for the use of specialists. Since they were not easy reading, it would be useful to provide the Secretariat with resources for the preparation of a United Nations publication containing a simplified account for less specialized readers, as in 1982.

(Ms. Bird, Australia)

23. The Scientific Committee's work had always been characterized by international co-operation of the highest order with specialized agencies like IAEA, the World Health Organization and UNEP.
24. Because the future work to be undertaken by the Scientific Committee was demanding, it would be useful to regularize the position of the Acting Secretary of the Committee, and to fill the vacant support position that had been authorized several years earlier.
25. The Australian Government was firmly committed to the objective of complete nuclear disarmament under effective international control, and had called on all States to negotiate urgently a comprehensive test-ban treaty that would for ever prohibit nuclear testing by all States in all environments. Such a treaty would ensure that nuclear arsenals were not further increased, would prevent the development of new weapons systems and the modernization of existing systems, and would strengthen efforts to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons.
26. In December 1986 the Treaty of Rarotonga had come into effect. It established a large area of the South Pacific as a nuclear-free zone, thereby addressing the concerns of South Pacific countries about nuclear risks. The Treaty had three Protocols which the five nuclear-weapon States had been invited to sign. Australia had welcomed the ratification of the Protocols by the Soviet Union and China; however, it regretted that the United States, the United Kingdom and France had not yet signed or ratified them.
27. Under the third Protocol, the signatories agreed not to test any explosive device within the nuclear-free zone. Countries in the region were, understandably, very concerned about France's continued nuclear testing in that area. In 1990, France had conducted tests on both Mururoa and Fangataufa. Australia was opposed in principle to nuclear testing, and did not accept the claim that the nuclear tests on Mururoa and Fangataufa, or anywhere else in the region, were without long-term danger to the region due to structural damage to the atoll.
28. Australia and the countries of the South Pacific had called on France many times to cease its nuclear-testing programme in the South Pacific, not only because its aim was to develop nuclear weapons - and in that sense her delegation called on nuclear-weapon States to cease their testing - but also because that testing was situated far from mainland France. As Australia had said many times before, if France insisted that it needed such a programme, it should conduct it in metropolitan France.
29. Mr. KOTÉY (Ghana) drew attention to the Scientific Committee's report (A/45/319), which stated that the Scientific Committee had concluded, among other things, that natural sources of radiation were the main contributor to the collective dose, and expressed concern about the number of unproven claims relative to the radiobiological effects of the Chernobyl accident.

(Mr. Kotey, Ghana)

30. While Ghana fully supported the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, it was at the same time conscious of the responsibility for safety that should go with nuclear science. In that regard, he commended the Scientific Committee's efforts to educate the countries of the world on some of the deleterious effects of atomic radiation.

31. In many developing countries, particularly where forests were threatened by the use of firewood as an energy source, nuclear power was being heralded as a reliable, inexhaustible and cost-effective energy source. Unfortunately, no one could deny that nuclear power was subject to serious problems of technological and human error. Accordingly, his delegation urged all Governments interested in developing nuclear or atomic programmes to ensure that they initially prepared themselves to contain accidents. In that connection, he commended the fruitful work of IAEA, which continued to exert an immense moral influence on the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

32. Furthermore, his delegation condemned all nuclear tests, whether in the atmosphere, under water or underground, and urged the international community to continue supporting the Scientific Committee, one of the useful instruments for the knowledge and expertise most necessary for individual and collective survival.

33. The CHAIRMAN said that the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, who had not been present when the list of speakers had been closed, wished to speak on the item. If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee agreed to give him the floor.

34. It was so decided.

35. Mr. KHANI (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation had carefully studied the Scientific Committee's report, particularly paragraph 5, in which the Committee expressed the hope that States Members of the United Nations, the specialized agencies and IAEA would continue to assist in its work, especially by providing relevant information on the subjects of interest for the future programme of study, so that its deliberations could be based on the broadest and most up-to-date scientific and technical information. In that respect, his delegation notes with satisfaction the co-operation between IAEA and the Scientific Committee.

36. It was important to eliminate all restrictions on the transfer of atomic energy for peaceful purposes, which was necessary in order for the developing countries to benefit from the medical and professional applications of such technology. His delegation hoped that draft resolution A/SPC/45/L.2 would be adopted by consensus.

37. Mrs. GAZEAU-SECRET (France), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the representative of Vanuatu - speaking in a lamentably virulent tone on behalf of the States members of the South Pacific Forum - and the representative of Australia had questioned the nuclear testing carried out by France in the South Pacific. She was very surprised at those statements, in view of the transparency

(Mrs. Gazeau-Secret, France)

and openness shown by the Government of France towards the States of the South Pacific, whose concerns her Government understood. France had hoped that, in return, those States would try to understand the requirements of its nuclear policy.

38. Her delegation would not reply to each one of the criticisms that had been expressed because they dealt with matters which were before other Committees; she would merely point out that the underground nuclear tests conducted by France did not jeopardize the interests of the States of the region, nor did they affect the health of the populations living there or their environment. That had been verified in situ by several international scientific missions, as noted in various publications issued by the Government of France and by several research institutes.

39. When General Assembly resolution 44/119 F had been adopted, the delegation of France had explained to the international community the reasons why it could not become a party to the Protocol to the Treaty of Rarotonga.

40. Mr. VAN LIEROP (Vanuatu), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that students of litigation practised presenting arguments in favour and against the same cause. Nevertheless, there were certain causes that could not be defended, for overriding moral reasons. One of them was slavery; another was genocide. For the countries of the South Pacific, the nuclear tests carried out in that region belonged to that category.

41. At present, the idea of reconciliation prevailed everywhere. Practically every analyst in the world now recognized that there would not be a nuclear war between East and West in the near future. Consequently, it made no sense to continue conducting nuclear tests in the South Pacific, a region in which everyone was decidedly opposed to such testing.

42. He drew attention to the appeal to the parliaments and public of all countries of the world made by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in its press release No. 137, dated 10 October 1990, which the peoples of the South Pacific endorsed. According to that release, nuclear tests had become an international problem which should be dealt with by the entire international community in order to attain a general and complete prohibition of nuclear testing.

43. Mrs. GAZEAU-SECRET (France), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said she rejected the allusion to slavery and genocide made by the representative of Vanuatu.

44. Ms. BIRD (Australia), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that the representative of France had asked the countries of the South Pacific to understand the reasons which obliged France to conduct nuclear tests in that zone. Australia and the other countries of the South Pacific asked France to respect the desire, which had been forcefully stated by their peoples, that those tests should not be conducted in the region where they lived.

(Ms. Bird, Australia)

45. The Government of Australia did not accept the statement that those tests did not entail lasting environmental consequences. However, Australia opposed nuclear tests not only or mainly because of the environmental risks which such tests involved, but because of its firm opposition to any kind of nuclear testing. For that reason, Australia and the other countries of the region appealed to France to put an end to its nuclear tests.

46. Mr. VAN LIEROP (Vanuatu), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that he had stated that there were certain questions on which no favourable arguments could be adduced, because of the strong moral considerations involved. Those issues included slavery, genocide and, for the peoples of the South Pacific, nuclear testing.

47. The CHAIRMAN said that it was time to take a decision on draft resolution A/SPC/45/L.2. The delegations of India and the Ukrainian SSR had asked to be added to the list of sponsors of that draft resolution. If he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee wished to adopt the draft resolution without a vote.

48. Draft resolution A/SPC/45/L.2 was adopted by consensus.

49. The CHAIRMAN said that the Committee had completed its consideration of item 72. The Committee would submit its report on the item to the plenary Assembly in due course.

The meeting rose at 11.20 a.m.