



SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 3rd MEETING

Chairman: Mr. AL-KAWARI (Qatar)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 74: EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS
SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION

* This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned within one week of the date of publication to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DE2 501, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate fascicle for each Committee.

Distr. GENERAL
A/SPC/42/SR.3
23 October 1987
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 74: EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION; REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION (A/42/210, 417; A/SPC/42/L.2)

1. The CHAIRMAN drew the attention of the members of the Committee to a letter from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Samoa relating to agenda item 74 and contained in document A/42/417. In addition, he proposed that the list of speakers on item 74 should be closed at the end of the meeting.
2. Mr. STRÖMHOLM (Sweden), introducing draft resolution A/SPC/42/L.2 on behalf of its sponsors, recalled the significant work done by the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, whose trademark had been efficiency and scientific integrity, and the valuable collaboration between that Committee and other international organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the World Health Organization (WHO).
3. The sponsors of the draft resolution welcomed the Scientific Committee's report describing its wide-ranging activities in the areas of physics and biology, but they expressed concern regarding the inadequacy of the Committee's current resources. Greater demands had been made on the Scientific Committee during the last few years and its financial means and the size of its staff were no longer adequate for its scheduled work. Sweden, a supporter of the Scientific Committee since its establishment, hoped that a solution to that problem would be found soon so that the Committee could continue to perform the important tasks entrusted to it. The sponsors hoped that the draft resolution, which was virtually identical to the one adopted by consensus the previous year, would also be adopted by consensus.
4. Mr. KOVAČIČ (Czechoslovakia), recalling that his country had been a member of the Scientific Committee since its inception, said that it had noted with satisfaction the progress that Committee had made in preparing a detailed report on the levels and biological effects of radiation from all sources, which it was to submit to the General Assembly in 1968. The scientific monographs useful to physicians, radiation protection specialists and biologists, which were to be issued as annexes to that report, were in particular awaited with great interest in professional circles.
5. Czechoslovakia, a sponsor of draft resolution A/SPC/42/L.2, appreciated the contributions made by the Scientific Committee to the strengthening of international co-operation, which had been instrumental in the conclusion in 1963 of the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water. Czechoslovakia advocated a universal and complete ban on nuclear weapon tests as a way of halting the nuclear arms race and preventing the development of new and even more devastating nuclear weapons. It therefore welcomed the Soviet moratorium, extended several times, on all nuclear explosions and regretted that no other nuclear Power had followed the example given by the

(Mr. Kovačić, Czechoslovakia)

USSR, even though many industrialized and developing countries, including some NATO countries, had declared themselves in favour of a complete ban on nuclear tests. While it was obvious that political will remained the decisive factor, his delegation was convinced that the work of the Scientific Committee could influence the decisions that Governments would take.

6. The social and economic development of mankind depended on broader and safe uses of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. The scientific work done by the Committee on admissible levels of exposure to radiation could play a significant role in that connection. One could only welcome the positive reaction at the extraordinary session of IAEA in 1986 to the establishment of an international régime for the safe development of nuclear energy and to the adoption of new international conventions on the strengthening of international co-operation in case of nuclear or radiation accidents.

7. Convinced that the gathering and evaluation of data on nuclear accidents would help in the elaboration of a scientific, objective report on the question, Czechoslovakia had provided data to the Scientific Committee on the impact of the Chernobyl accident within its territory.

8. The socialist countries had at the previous session of the General Assembly proposed the establishment of a comprehensive system of international peace and security. The implementation of the Soviet proposal for the establishment of an international system of global verification of radiation security, made in the Conference on Disarmament the previous August, would make it possible not only to evaluate the impact of failures of nuclear equipment but also to monitor the application of eventual agreements on a nuclear test ban.

9. His delegation, since it regarded the activities of the Scientific Committee as essential, was concerned about the material and financial difficulties facing it and hoped that everything would be done to enable the Committee to carry on with its work despite the financial crisis.

10. Mr. LABORIO (Argentina), recalling the importance of the work of the Scientific Committee, particularly in physics and biology, said that his country, a member of that Committee since its establishment, was extremely concerned over its inadequate resources, which were well below the level authorized in the past. His delegation hoped that the Scientific Committee would continue to collaborate, to an even greater extent, with other United Nations agencies.

11. Because it considered the peaceful use of nuclear energy to be one of the stimuli to its own national development, Argentina had sponsored the draft resolution on the effects of atomic radiation and hoped that, as in the previous year, the draft would receive the unanimous support of the members of the Committee.

12. Mr. POULSEN (Denmark), speaking on behalf of the twelve member States of the European Community, expressed appreciation for the Scientific Committee's valuable contribution to knowledge of ionizing radiation and its effects on man and his environment.

(Mr. Poulsen, Denmark)

13. Fortunately, accidents involving the risk of exposure to radiation were rare; when they did happen, however, there was a need for close international co-operation. The Twelve shared the sympathy which the Scientific Committee had expressed to the delegation of the Soviet Union for the accident which had occurred on 26 April 1986 at Chernobyl and appreciated the Committee's efforts to collect sufficient data on that accident; they looked forward to the report that the Committee intended to present to the General Assembly at its forty-third session.

14. The Twelve had learned with regret of the staffing difficulties confronting the Scientific Committee and felt that it had been disproportionately affected by the economy measures taken in the Organization. Those difficulties had been exacerbated by increased demands for information since the Chernobyl accident.

15. The Twelve welcomed the close co-operation established between the Scientific Committee and the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Health Organization, the International Atomic Energy Agency and other international governmental and non-governmental organizations. They would continue their co-operation with the Committee, whose reports on physical, biological and genetic aspects of radiation were of great value to the entire international community. The European community had also granted \$40,000 to the Committee in order to help in the assessment of potential health effects of the Chernobyl accident.

16. The Twelve would join in the adoption by consensus of a draft resolution renewing the mandate of the Scientific Committee.

17. Mr. JIN Guihua (China) said that his Government attached great importance to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. China was currently building two nuclear power plants in the provinces of Guangdong and Zhejiang and the issue of nuclear safety was one of its main concerns. China's nuclear industry was still young, but thanks to the exchange of information with IAEA it had been able to establish its own nuclear safety system on a preliminary basis. The State Nuclear Safety Administration has been set up for that purpose and had independent authority to prevent negligence in matters of nuclear safety.

18. In keeping with General Assembly resolution A/41/62, a Chinese delegation had participated in the work of the Scientific Committee for the first time at its thirty-sixth session, held at Vienna from 23 to 27 March. China was aware of its obligations to the Scientific Committee and would make every effort to assist it in its scientific research for the elimination of the harmful effects of atomic radiation.

19. In view of the important function performed by the Committee his delegation hoped that efforts would be made as soon as possible to improve the working conditions of its Secretariat.

20. Mrs. MAUALA (Samoa), speaking on behalf of the States Members of the United Nations which were also members of the South Pacific Forum, recalled that in 1986, spurred by the tragic accident at Chernobyl, the international community had moved

(Mrs. Mauala, Samoa)

quickly to complete two conventions, the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident and the Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency, thereby demonstrating that States could unite to take immediate action when anxiety about the threat of radiation was widespread. When the danger was more distant, however, and particularly if it was primarily a regional rather than an international concern, those countries which were not immediately affected often remained deaf to the complaints of those nearer at hand. Thus, despite the constant protests of the member States of the South Pacific Forum, France persisted in conducting nuclear weapon tests on the opposite side of the world from its own territory, placing the environment of the South Pacific region at risk. In the first half of 1987, France had conducted four nuclear tests with a total estimated yield of more than 50 kilotonnes, and a further series of four tests could be expected before the end of the year, causing further damage to Mururoa Atoll.

21. France maintained that, because of the safety measures it had taken, the poisonous radioactive debris from those explosions would not pollute neither the sea nor the air. When one bore in mind that such debris could remain radioactive for hundreds or thousands of years, however, it was easy to understand why the scientific mission which had visited Mururoa had refused to rule out the possibility of serious long-term damage. The report of that mission, which France often cited in support of its own position, gave no assurances that the testing programme was completely safe. Moreover, knowledge of the dangers of radioactivity was far from comprehensive. Recent nuclear accidents had called into question assertions about the relatively low risks of radiation exposure.

22. Since the discussion of the item at the forty-first session, France had signed a convention for the preservation of the marine environment of the South Pacific under which it had undertaken not to dump radioactive waste or other harmful substances in the South Pacific and to take all appropriate measures to prevent, reduce and control the pollution which might result from nuclear testing. France had also made an effort to demonstrate that its testing programme was being conducted to a high standard of safety, and it had not dissented from the recent adoption by consensus of the Final Document of the International Conference on the Relationship between Disarmament and Development. However, the continuation of its nuclear testing programme in the South Pacific demonstrated its total disregard for the concerns of the countries of the region. If France was so sure of the safety of its programme, why were the tests not being conducted in metropolitan France? The radiation threat grew with each test. The peoples of the South Pacific therefore demanded that France halt its nuclear testing programme in the region.

23. Mr. OKELY (Australia) commended the professional competence of the Scientific Committee but warned against the danger of seeing its work in scientific isolation from the real world of nuclear over-armament.

24. Australia was firmly committed to the objective of comprehensive nuclear disarmament under effective international control, and consistently urged the two super-Powers to continue their negotiations in the hope that they would lead to deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals as a step towards total disarmament.

(Mr. Okely, Australia)

25. For some years, Australia had been calling on all States to join in negotiating a comprehensive ban on nuclear testing as the only way to end the arms race.

26. The Treaty of Rarotonga, which had come into effect in December 1986, provided for a nuclear-free zone covering a large area of the South Pacific. It had three protocols which the five nuclear weapon States had been asked to sign. China had signed without reservation, while the Soviet Union had done so with reservations the nature of which raised serious doubts. The United States, the United Kingdom and France had refused to sign the protocols relevant to them. Their refusal was all the more regrettable since nothing in the Treaty, the prime purpose of which was to enhance stability in a region which had so far largely escaped the tensions of great Power rivalry, eroded their security in any way.

27. France continued to test nuclear explosive devices in the South Pacific, exposing that region to the potential for future radioactive pollution problems which could well result from a progressive geological degradation of the delicate Mururoa Atoll structure.

28. Australia rejected the arguments advanced by the French authorities, which were based on a selective reading of the Atkinson report. It objected to the lack of concern shown by France for the future generations of Pacific Islanders who might have to live with and possibly die from the consequences of its selfishness. Australia called on France to reconsider its decision to continue testing in the South Pacific and, if it continued to maintain that it needed a testing programme, to conduct it closer to home.

29. Mr. GAUSSOT (France) said that his delegation welcomed the admission of China to the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation and the fact that China had participated in the Committee's work at its thirty-sixth session, held at Vienna from 23 to 27 March.

30. His delegation endorsed reservedly the statement made on behalf of the European Community by the representative of Denmark. France was aware of the difficulties currently facing the Scientific Committee, whose resources were far from adequate to the tasks entrusted to it. France was highly appreciative of the Scientific Committee's work, particularly in assessing the consequences of the Chernobyl accident, and set great store by the report which it was to submit to the General Assembly at its forty-third session. It believed that the Committee should pursue its mission actively in close co-operation with various United Nations agencies and therefore approved the programme of work which it had drawn up. It was in that spirit that his delegation had co-sponsored draft resolution A/SPC/42/L.2.

31. With regard to France's underground nuclear tests in the South Pacific, everyone had known for years that those tests were being conducted in conditions of utmost safety and had absolutely no harmful effects for either the populations or the environment of the region. On-site studies, including those made by scientists

(Mr. Gaussot, France)

from the region, had shown that radiation levels in the immediate vicinity of the Mururoa test site and throughout the Pacific region remained lower than in other parts of the world. The representative of Samoa had said that the French tests had damaged the Atoll's physical integrity. There were no grounds for such a statement. Although the Atkinson report said that radioactive leakage might occur in 500 years at the earliest, it did so on the basis of a working hypothesis which assumed a total release of energy more than 100 times greater than that measured at Mururoa over the past 10 years. Thus, there was nothing in the report which gave reason to doubt the harmlessness of the French nuclear tests.

32. The representatives of Samoa and Australia had called on France to conduct its tests at home in future. That was somewhat akin to a State which had a common border with the United States asking the latter to carry out its nuclear tests in the north-eastern United States rather than in the Nevada desert.

33. France would not waive its legitimate right to conduct in French territory, in exercise of its sovereignty, an activity which was necessary to its security and jeopardized neither peace in the region, the safety of States in the region, the health of the local population nor the environment.

34. France would give its position on the Treaty of Rarotonga in the First Committee when the item came up.

35. Mr. SCHLICKE (German Democratic Republic) noted that, as an important element of worldwide efforts for environmental control, the Scientific Committee's activities contributed to international security. Its reports were highly appreciated by scientists in his country.

36. The tragic accidents which had occurred in nuclear facilities showed that atomic energy was mankind's greatest and potentially most dangerous source of energy. At their summit meeting held at Berlin in May 1987, the States parties to the Warsaw Treaty had proposed a comprehensive disarmament programme which was a logical consequence of the 1985 Geneva summit meeting at which the Soviet Union and the United States had stated that a nuclear war could not be won and must never be fought.

37. His country welcomed the envisaged conclusion of a treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States on the total elimination of their medium-range and short-range missiles, the implementation of which would be a start on disarmament proper. The halting of nuclear tests would also be a decisive step towards ending the arms race, and efforts should be made at the Conference on Disarmament and in other forums to expedite completion of a comprehensive test ban treaty. The Socialist States had submitted a proposal on basic provisions for such a treaty. The proposed provisions included specific requirements regarding verification and envisaged an international exchange of data on the radioactivity of air masses.

38. A comprehensive test ban would obviously contribute to the protection of man and his environment. His country's relevant authorities had noted that the rate of

(Mr. Schlicke, German Democratic Republic)

environmental contamination had decreased considerably in the national territory after the 1963 Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water had come into effect.

39. The tragic events at Chernobyl and the accidents at nuclear power plants in other countries called for enhanced co-operation within the United Nations system on measures for the safe and peaceful development of nuclear energy. His country had always promoted efforts to enhance nuclear safety and had participated in the drafting of the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident and the Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency, both of which it had ratified in April 1987. It had long believed that it was an expression of good-neighbourly relations to inform other States about incidents in nuclear plants which could have adverse effects on their territories. Accordingly, in September 1987 it had signed an agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany on an exchange of information and experience in the field of radiation protection. It had also concluded similar agreements with Denmark and Norway.

40. The German Democratic Republic advocated the adoption of further measures to guarantee the safe development of nuclear energy and firmly supported the programme of action submitted by the USSR to that end.

41. The enormous efforts that had been necessary to overcome the consequences of the Chernobyl accident had clearly shown that mankind would not survive a nuclear war. All people of goodwill considered the prevention of a nuclear inferno to be humanity's most urgent and lofty task. A halt to the arms race and nuclear disarmament would greatly improve the opportunities for international co-operation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

42. Mr. OKELY (Australia), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, expressed surprise that the representative of France had again claimed that the French nuclear tests were being carried out under perfectly safe conditions and that he had reaffirmed his assertions concerning the Atkinson report. Although Australia recognized that current levels of background radiation at the Atoll were lower than those observed in most regions of the world, his Government was deeply concerned by the long-term effects of the tests, particularly the possibility of radioactive products leaking through the structure of the Atoll. In its conclusions, the Atkinson report indicated that the structural integrity of the surface of the Atoll had been impaired through fissuring, subsidence and submarine slides and that although there was currently no geological evidence of short-term leakage, the hydrology of limestone and volcanic rock was such as to suggest that leakage from the detonation chambers could already occur in 500 years. It was that period of time that worried the countries of the region.

43. If France believed sincerely in the harmlessness of and need for those tests, it was strange that it did not stage them on metropolitan territory. The fact of the matter was that the tests were not completely safe and their long-term consequences would affect an area from which France might have withdrawn long before the problems appeared; thus, the inhabitants of the area would be condemned

(Mr. Okely, Australia)

to live in the chaos left behind by France, which conducted its tests over the strong objections of the countries of the region.

44. Mrs. MAUALA (Samoa), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that certain parts of the Atkinson report undermined the claims made by the representative of France. The authors of the report pointed out that the Atoll had in fact undergone considerable change. Their conclusions referred to subsidence, submarine slides, a total submergence of a reef and erosion of the impermeable layer of limestone that protected the Atoll.

45. Moreover, the argument advanced by the French delegation that there would be no leakage of radioactivity into the environment during the next 100,000 years was totally incompatible with the above-mentioned conclusions, which indicated that the water at the nuclear-test sites might leach radioactive materials and that in the long run (500 years), certain processes might transfer the contaminated water to the biosphere.

46. Mr. GAUSSOT (France), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, said that certain countries located thousands of kilometres from Mururoa persisted in denouncing France's nuclear tests in a discriminatory fashion even though all on-site scientific studies had concluded that the tests were harmless. That being the case, such accusations were devoid of scientific foundation and were probably motivated by purely political concerns. The representative of Australia had again cited the part of the Atkinson report referring to changes that the structure of the Atoll might undergo in a period of 500 to 1,000 years. But that possibility hypothesized a total release of energy more than 100 times greater than that measured at Mururoa over the past 10 years. Hence, the authors of the report had advanced a hypothetical level that was 100 times greater than that of the actual French nuclear tests.

47. The representative of Australia had asked France to pursue its nuclear tests on metropolitan territory. Yet all States conducted nuclear tests in their least populated areas, and it would be surprising if, for example, the United States Government decided to conduct nuclear tests in the north-eastern part of its territory rather than in the Nevada desert. Moreover, France conducted its tests in the Pacific for a number of physical reasons. A nuclear explosion sent a train of vibrations through the ground whose effects were complex and depended upon the nature of the ground, the force of the explosion and the distance. Whereas no area on metropolitan territory met the requisite conditions from that point of view, the Mururoa Atoll offered a very favourable geological and physical configuration.

48. He thanked the representative of Samoa for voicing concern at the damage that, in her opinion, the French territory of Mururoa might sustain.

49. Mr. OKELY (Australia) categorically rejected the allegations of the representative of France to the effect that the protests voiced by Australia against the French nuclear tests were motivated by political concerns. Speaking on behalf of the South Pacific Forum countries, the delegation of Samoa had rightly

(Mr. Okely, Australia)

underscored the ecological aspect of the problem and the concern of the countries of the region about the future. At issue was a very long-term deterioration of the environment. Those countries therefore were calling upon France to stop its testing in the region.

50. Mrs. MAUALA (Samoa) said that her delegation had long demonstrated that the French nuclear tests had in fact damaged the environment of the countries in the region, an environment upon which the inhabitants heavily depended for their subsistence.

51. Mr. GAUSSOT (France) took note of the assurances of the representative of Australia that the verbal attacks against French nuclear tests had no political motivations. In that case, such accusations were based on incorrect information, and he hoped the representative of Australia would remedy that state of affairs. His Government also wished to point out to the representative of Samoa that the territory of Mururoa was French territory.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.