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Summary record of the 10th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 16 October 2008, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Argüello (Argentina)
later: Mr. Cujba (Vice-Chairman). (Republic of Moldova)
later: Mr. Argüello (Argentina)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 27: Effects of atomic radiation (A/63/46)

1. **Mr. Crick** (Secretary of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation), introducing the Committee's report (A/63/46) and accompanying his statement with a computerized slide presentation, recalled that the Committee's mandate was to assess the levels, effects and risks of ionizing radiation, identify emerging issues and increase knowledge on ionizing radiation. The Committee had 21 member States and a further six had expressed the desire to join. The Committee's recommendations on protection against radiation were taken up by international organizations responsible for setting standards. Those standards were adopted by Member States and subsequently formed the basis for international conventions and standards.

2. During its fifty-sixth session, the Committee had approved for publication five scientific annexes on medical radiation exposures, radiation exposures of the general public and workers, exposures in accidents, an update on the assessment of the Chernobyl accident and the effects of ionizing radiation on non-human biota. In addition, members had considered the Committee's strategic plan and programme of work and, in response to the request of the General Assembly contained in its resolution 62/100, had provided views on staffing, funding and membership.

3. Humans were exposed to ionizing radiation from natural cosmic and terrestrial sources and from artificial sources. Medical diagnosis was, by far, the largest source of artificial exposure. Since the Committee's previous survey, covering the period 1991 to 1996, diagnostic medical examinations were estimated to have increased by nearly 50 per cent.

4. Computerized tomography (CT) scanning accounted for a large proportion of that increase. The typical dose of radiation from one CT scan, approximately 10 millisieverts (mSv), was not very high. However, repeated exposure, particularly of young children, to such doses was a cause for concern.

5. In respect of occupational exposure, he said that, in the past, attention had been focused on artificial sources of radiation. It was now realized that a very large number of workers were exposed occupationally to natural sources of radiation as well. In fact, the number of persons who were exposed to enhanced

levels of natural radiation was greater than the number exposed to artificial sources. In particular, coal miners and workers in other extractive industries, aircraft crew and persons exposed to radon in the workplace received higher doses of natural radiation.

6. Radiation exposures from accidents had been discussed in past reports and there had been specific evaluations of the 1986 Chernobyl accident, which had caused particularly serious disruption, as outlined in paragraphs 71 and 72. As of the release of the report, more than 6,000 cases of thyroid cancer had been reported among persons who had been children or adolescents in 1986 in affected areas. A substantial portion of those cases could be attributed to drinking milk that had been contaminated with iodine-131.

7. Although a considerable volume of new research data had become available, the Committee had concluded that, other than previously documented effects, there had been no consistent evidence to date of any other health effects among the general public that could be attributed to radiation exposure as a result of the Chernobyl accident. That was essentially consistent with the conclusions contained in the 1988 and 2000 reports regarding the scale and nature of the health consequences of the Chernobyl accident.

8. After drawing attention to the strategic objectives, thematic priorities and programme of work outlined in paragraphs 8-12 of the report, he noted that over the years, data and specialized scientific literature had increased dramatically in volume, leading the Committee to produce increasingly complex reports. Consequently, it had become difficult for the Secretary, the sole professional in the Committee's secretariat, to cover all of the relevant scientific specialities. The situation had led to significant delays in the production of the Committee's reports and it had created an increased risk for error — something that could fundamentally damage the Committee's reputation.

9. In a soon-to-be released report, the Secretary-General was expected to announce that the Committee's financial resources had been increased for the 2008-2009 biennium and that, in order to increase the Committee's membership by six States, the sum of \$90,000 per biennium would have to be budgeted and an additional post of scientific officer at the P-4 level added.

10. Finally, he said that, during its fifty-sixth session, the Scientific Committee had expressed concern that

any increase in its size could have a detrimental effect on the quality and efficiency of its work and it had therefore suggested that the number of members should remain unchanged. Other possible solutions to the question of membership would be to replace existing members or to designate some States as permanent members and others as rotating members on the basis of evaluative criteria.

11. *Mr. Cujba (Republic of Moldova), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.*

12. **Mr. Bowman** (Canada), speaking in his capacity as Chairman of the Scientific Committee said that the Committee had recently approved the publication of five authoritative annexes on exposures from radiation accidents; exposures of the public and workers from various sources of radiation; medical radiation exposures; health effects due to radiation from the Chernobyl accident; and effects of ionizing radiation on non-human biota. Such assessments served as a vital tool, enabling Governments and organizations to evaluate radiation risks and establish radiation protection and safety standards.

13. Noting that, in a forthcoming report the Secretary-General was expected to recommend that a second professional secretariat post be allocated for the Committee and an additional \$90,000 allocated for the biennium in order to ensure the Committee's effectiveness, he said that his Government agreed with those recommendations. It would be worth consulting Committee representatives and secretariat on objective criteria and modalities that might be applied to evaluate the potential contribution of additional Member States. The resource issue must, however, be addressed first to ensure that the Committee's programme of work did not stagnate. It was to be hoped that the six Member States that had been invited as observers to the Scientific Committee at its fifty-sixth session would also be able to attend the fifty-seventh session.

14. **Ms. Pessôa** (Brazil), speaking on behalf of the member States of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the candidate country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the associated countries Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, observed that the report outlined in rigorous scientific detail the global levels of exposure to ionizing radiation. It was interesting that the main sources of exposure were still the natural sources of radiation, whose concentrations

could vary by several orders of magnitude from one location to another.

15. Also noteworthy were the Special Committee's assessments on the impact of exposure to nuclear energy: while the generation of electrical energy by nuclear power plants had grown steadily, the doses to which the public was exposed were generally small, and had decreased over time because of lower discharge levels; and the exposure of workers to radiation in commercial nuclear power plants had been falling steadily over the past three decades, whereas occupational exposure to natural sources of radiation had remained constant.

16. The Scientific Committee had also confirmed the conclusions of its 1996 report that environmental radiation levels to which non-human biota were exposed were unlikely to have significant effects, thus underscoring the fact that human safety standards also protected flora and fauna.

17. Furthermore, it had confirmed that although the Chernobyl accident had been the most severe in the history of civilian nuclear power, there was still no firm evidence of any substantial health effects in the general population attributable to radiation, accept for the known incidence of thyroid cancer in children.

18. Medical exposure to radiation remained by far the largest source of exposure, and was increasing especially in countries with the most advanced and comprehensive medical care. Action was clearly needed to provide greater protection against radiation for patients needing radio-diagnostic or radio-therapeutic treatments.

19. It was troubling to learn that local populations continued to be exposed to radiation resulting from military activities by the nuclear-weapon States. There were not only the residual effects of the past atomic bomb tests, but the installations where nuclear weapons had been produced had released long-lived radiation.

20. A new and welcome feature of the report was the strategic plan and programme of work it presented. The MERCOSUR countries endorsed the future thematic priorities set out, and agreed that the Scientific Committee should initiate work immediately on assessments of levels of radiation from energy production and the effects on human health and the environment. However, in response to paragraph 6 of

General Assembly resolution 62/100, the Committee should produce a report as soon as possible on the impact of the uncertainty in radiation risk estimation and the attributability of health effects to radiation exposure.

21. **Ms. Lebovits** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro; and, in addition, Armenia, Liechtenstein and Moldova, welcomed the report of the Scientific Committee noting that its assessments of the effects of radiation on human health and the environment remained vital to understanding of radiation exposure at the international and regional levels. Medical exposure to radiation, currently the largest source of artificial radiation exposure, must be an international priority with respect to radiation protection.

22. The European Union commended the strategic plan and programme of work outlined in the report. The decision to focus on increasing awareness among authorities, the scientific community and civil society with regard to levels of ionizing radiation and its effects would further strengthen the Committee's reputation. The definition of thematic priorities should proceed logically from work accomplished to date. The European Union fully supported the strategic shifts envisaged, further showed the Committee's determination to deepen knowledge while improving vital cooperation and information exchange with international organizations and other stakeholders.

23. The Scientific Committee provided the international community with essential, independent information on many common areas of interest with regard to the effects of ionizing radiation. However, despite the increased interest in its work and growing concerns about radiation protection, the Scientific Committee's resources had not seen a commensurate increase. The delays in the publication of its findings were potentially damaging, since many countries were increasingly keen to develop peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The medical use of radiation was also rising sharply and access to data of the kind only the Scientific Committee could provide was essential for risk assessment purposes. The European Union thus called for a comprehensive discussion of how the Scientific Committee's annual budget and scientific team might be strengthened and how its scope might be

adapted to meet budgetary constraints and achieve greater efficiency. The Secretary-General should address the resource issue as a matter of priority so that the question of increased membership might be examined. The option of multinational delegations should also be explored.

24. **Mr. López-Trigo** (Cuba) reiterated his delegation's firm commitment to the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons and its total opposition to the use of nuclear energy for military purposes, adding that it attached great importance to the work of the Scientific Committee as a source of specialized and objective information on the issues within its competence.

25. Despite its modest resources, his Government had provided significant cooperation assistance to the people of Ukraine, by means of a rehabilitation programme for the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Sixteen years running, the programme had treated thousands of patients, most of them children. The programme had also yielded primary data on internal contamination in infants from areas affected by the accident. That information had been disseminated in leading scientific forums and used by such United Nations bodies as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Scientific Committee itself.

26. Reiterating that the request by six member States for membership of the Scientific Committee should be considered as soon as possible, his delegation expressed regret that the report of the Secretary-General on the financial and administrative implications of increased membership in the Scientific Committee had yet to be officially published.

27. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic) said his country's policy on nuclear technology was founded on the belief that all States, without exception, should be allowed to use such technology for peaceful purposes. His delegation was therefore concerned that non-proliferation was being used as a pretext to hinder developing States from acquiring nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

28. His delegation had always called for the elimination of nuclear weapons stockpiles and had been one of the first to call for the establishment in the Middle East of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, including, foremost, nuclear weapons. In 2003, it had sponsored a draft resolution in the Security Council on the establishment of such a zone.

Furthermore, his country had become a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1969 and had concluded a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

29. Israel was the only State that possessed nuclear weapons without international supervision. Its refusal to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and implement IAEA safeguards jeopardized regional and global security and peace and portended an environmental disaster on the scale of Chernobyl. The community of nations should put pressure on Israel to place all eight of its nuclear facilities under IAEA supervision, in accordance with Security Council resolution 487 (1981).

30. The burial of nuclear waste in the territories of developing countries and in the high seas posed a serious environmental risk of ionizing radiation. International silence in the face of the continued burial by Israel of such waste in the occupied Syrian Golan cast doubts on the commitment to non-proliferation and the relevant international agreements.

31. **Mr. Singh** (India) said that the work of the Scientific Committee had considerable implications for the health of thousands of occupational workers, people undergoing radiation-based medical procedures, people living in areas of the world with high natural background radiation and the general public, and for the protection of the environment. Its strategic plan for 2009-2013 would heighten awareness among civil society and the scientific community; the thematic priorities, in particular those relating to exposure to natural sources of radiation and improved understanding of the effects from low-dose-rate radiation exposure were also welcome. Publication of the scientific annexes to its reports was long overdue, especially considering that some Member States and organizations relied on them for information. It was heartening that more Member States wished to join the Scientific Committee, however the administrative and financial implications must be taken into account and adequate resources provided.

32. In several countries, per capita exposure to medical radiation now exceeded natural background radiation. All Member States should thus be encouraged to maintain good records of patient and attendee exposure and adopt requisite regulations. It was also important to assess the biological and health effects of natural radiation exposure. The linear no-threshold concept of radiation dose response, which

had been the cornerstone of international regulation of radiation exposure limits, should be reviewed, since non-radiation sources, such as smoking and diet, could also trigger health effects. Non-cancer effects such as congenital malformations, in utero and cardiovascular effects should also be analysed when determining exposure limits.

33. *Mr. Argüello (Argentina) resumed the Chair.*

34. **Ms. Gatehouse** (Australia) said that her delegation appreciated the assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in addressing the Committee's funding issues, and welcomed the establishment of a UNEP general trust fund for voluntary contributions to support its work, to which her Government had contributed.

35. The Scientific Committee had a low profile compared to other United Nations bodies, but performed a critical task. Its unique work had provided the scientific basis for establishing international standards for the protection of the public and of workers against ionizing radiation, and the standards were linked to important legal and regulatory instruments for the protection of the population. As a result of the Committee's work, more was probably known about the effects of ionizing radiation than about many other pollutants, such as chemical and biological pollutants.

36. The Scientific Committee's work was more vital than ever. The report showed that the worldwide exposures from man-made sources had doubled in the past 15 years, and that the main current issue was the risks due to developing technologies in diagnostic medicine, responsible for exposures a thousand times higher than those from the nuclear fuel cycle. At the same time, however, the radiological impact of the various activities associated with the nuclear fuel cycle had to be better understood, given the interest, in some countries, in expanding nuclear power at a time of climate change. The Scientific Committee was essential to an objective scientific assessment of the methods of nuclear power production.

37. Compared to the hundreds of billions of dollars that could be wasted without a sound understanding of the effects of ionizing radiation, the modest funding provided to the Scientific Committee of approximately \$1 million per year seemed inadequate. With the expansion of scientific knowledge and literature across a wide variety of scientific disciplines, it was no longer

possible to continue with just one scientific Secretary to cover all the work comprehensively. As a minimum, the Scientific Committee's secretariat should comprise one scientist from the physical sciences and one from the biological sciences, to review and edit the reports of consultants for consideration by the Committee's working groups.

38. The matter of the understaffing of the Scientific Committee should be addressed before considering whether to increase its membership, and the observer States should keep their current status for the time being, until the funding issues were resolved. It was disappointing that the Secretary-General's report on financial and administrative implications of increased Scientific Committee membership had yet to be issued. The sole criteria for membership in the Scientific Committee should be knowledge of a broad range of issues in the field of radiation levels and effects; the ability to compile, prepare and evaluate scientific reports; and the ability to summarize the material for the General Assembly, the scientific community and the public.

39. **Mr. Muller** (Marshall Islands) said that he would speak about the tragic consequences of policy decisions made on the basis of incomplete science. Both the United Nations and the former Administering Authority of the Marshall Islands, the United States, bore responsibility for the effects of atomic radiation in his country. From 1948 to 1958, while it was a Trust Territory, 67 large-scale atmospheric nuclear weapons had been tested there, with the explicit approval of the Trusteeship Council. During those tests, Marshallese children played in the radioactive fallout, believing it was falling snow. Declassified documents had revealed that some of the communities exposed were the subject of deliberate medical testing. His people had suffered years of displacement, devastating disease and death. There had been a widespread environmental impact from the nuclear contamination, which still persisted. Later resettlement efforts in contaminated areas, made without a full understanding of the effects of contamination, had created a new generation of tragic challenges, and some communities still lived in a nuclear exile.

40. For the people of the Marshall Islands, the effects of atomic radiation were not just a historic occurrence but a contemporary and future legacy. The true impact of the weapons tests — regularly reported to the United Nations — upon its people, culture and environment was beyond description. Yet there had been no

response from the international community, apart from two Trusteeship Council resolutions, one in 1954 and one in 1956, assuring that urgent steps would be taken to compensate the Marshallese and return them to their homeland. Although the United States had special accountability in the matter, all Member States had been entrusted with the stewardship of the Marshall Islands and thus shared in the fiduciary responsibility for nuclear testing there.

41. Some important action had been taken. The Compact of Free Association with the United States had resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship under which some of the impact of the radiation had been addressed. A bill currently before the United States Senate would provide funding to address some of the unmet needs, relating to health effects of radiation and the monitoring of waste disposal. However, adequate compensation for actual losses or for future effects of residual low-level exposure — about which there had been no scientific knowledge at the time of the signing of the Compact with the United States — had yet to be received. A political settlement based upon incomplete scientific understanding did not fulfil Trusteeship Council resolutions 1082 (XIV) and 1493 (XVII). The nuclear claims tribunal established under the Compact for final determination of all claims had fairly adjudicated the claims for injury, health impact and loss of land but had been given funding for only a small fraction of the adjudicated damages, which totalled hundreds of millions of dollars.

42. Regarding the health impact, the Marshall Islands needed not only monitoring of the affected population but a more comprehensive medical care strategy and infrastructure to treat both survivors and subsequent generations.

43. His Government was also concerned about the residual impact and proper maintenance of a 30-year-old concrete storage dome containing nuclear waste material. At the time, the Administering Authority had questioned the need for absolute structural integrity, and short cuts might have been taken during its design and construction. The Marshall Islands had neither the financial resources nor the technical expertise to undertake long-term stewardship of it.

44. While there had been some environmental remediation, certain areas in the Marshall Islands continued to be deemed unfit for permanent resettlement. At the latest Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific leaders

had recognized that the Marshall Islands must be adequately compensated for losses and obtain the full commitment of the United States to an adequate response to the effects of its nuclear testing. The ongoing struggle of the Marshallese people was clearly an argument for providing greater support to the Scientific Committee in its analysis of the effects of nuclear testing.

45. **Mr. Maung Wai** (Myanmar) said that the work of the Scientific Committee was valued both by Governments and the scientific community, and its recommendations informed decision-making on radiation-related issues. The International Labour Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations had used its data in the formulation of international safety standards and protection programmes.

46. The consequences of the Chernobyl disaster had underscored the potentially devastating effects of atomic radiation on human health and the environment. The Scientific Committee's work had been of use to the populations concerned, as well as to Governments formulating policies on radiation issues. It was important to ensure that the Scientific Committee had the support and resources that it needed, to reflect its increased workload, else it could not function effectively on a sustainable basis. The general trust fund established by UNEP would be a useful alternative source of funding. The Scientific Committee's staffing problem should also be addressed.

47. **Mr. Kharatinsky** (Ukraine) said that his delegation attached particular importance to the issue of the effects of atomic radiation and therefore to the activities of the Scientific Committee, whose findings and proposals were used by international actors in formulating international standards and instruments for the protection of human beings and the environment against ionizing radiation. He noted with appreciation that the Scientific Committee had undertaken a broad review of the sources of ionizing radiation and of its effects on human health and the environment.

48. Given its interest in the result-oriented work of the Scientific Committee, his Government was ready to share with the Scientific Committee the unique scientific and practical experience it had amassed in dealing with the effects of atomic radiation.

49. While noting that Ukraine had been able to participate as an observer at the Scientific Committee's

previous session, he said that its observer status had limited its ability to receive relevant reports and information from the Secretariat, let alone participate in decision-making. After calling upon UNEP to strengthen the Scientific Committee's financing mechanisms, he said that, should financial constraints render membership expansion impossible at the current time, his delegation nonetheless wished to express its desire to attend the next session as an observer and to have that desire reflected in the relevant General Assembly resolution. Furthermore, Ukrainian experts should also be involved in the Scientific Committee's intersessional work.

50. Noting with appreciation that the Scientific Committee had developed a strategic plan for the period 2009 to 2013, he expressed satisfaction with its efforts to provide an authoritative review of the health effects of exposure to radiation on the general public, workers and non-human biota.

51. Turning to the Chernobyl-related aspects of the Scientific Committee's work, he pointed out that the collective dose of radiation from the Chernobyl accident was many times greater than the combined dose from all other accidents resulting in public exposure.

52. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 62/9 and in keeping with the recommendations of the Chernobyl Forum, the United Nations Coordinator of International Cooperation on Chernobyl, in cooperation with the Governments of Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation, had continued to study the health, environmental and socio-economic consequences of the Chernobyl accident. On the basis of new research data resulting from that cooperation, the Scientific Committee had concluded that exposure to high levels of radiation had proven fatal to plant staff and emergency workers in the first few months after the accident. It had also found a higher incidence of leukaemia and cataracts and an increased risk of radiation-induced effects among persons exposed to the Chernobyl accident.

53. Since the accident, initiatives to better understand and mitigate its consequences had been launched by such international entities as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

54. **Mr. Ahmad** (Pakistan) said that his delegation attached great importance to the Scientific

Committee's contribution to promoting a broader knowledge and understanding of the levels of ionizing radiation and their effects on human beings and the environment. Expanding its membership would constitute a step towards increasing international cooperation in the field of radiation protection. To that end, his Government looked forward to contributing its considerable capacity and expertise to the Scientific Committee's work.

55. Given the importance of the latter's activities, he hoped that any lingering problems with funding and staffing of its secretariat would be addressed immediately. Neither the Scientific Committee's mandate nor the question of expansion of its membership should be affected by financial and administrative issues.

56. **Ms. Lintonen** (Finland) said that she hoped that the resources and budgetary deficits of the Scientific Committee's secretariat would be addressed urgently, so as to make it possible for Finland to become a full member of the Committee.

57. Both natural and man-made sources of ionizing radiation were hazardous to human health. Exposure to natural radiation was to some extent unavoidable, while medical use of radiation was an indispensable part of modern health care. Her country had been among the first to discover that radon in drinking water and indoor air was a major contributor to exposure of citizens to ionizing radiation, as the rate of exposure of Finns to radon was one of the highest in the world.

58. In the early 1960s, reports from Lapland had revealed that reindeer herders had been exposed to fallout from atmospheric nuclear tests via the food chain; that observation had led to the banning of atmospheric nuclear tests.

59. The exposure of workers, and to a lesser extent, of the public, to low levels of radiation from nuclear energy production and other heavily regulated industrial uses of ionizing radiation had become an integral part of industrialized society. His Government was committed to continuing to research the risks posed by radiation.

60. **Mr. Mishkorudny** (Belarus) said that although 20 years had passed since the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, hundreds of thousands of people continued to be affected by atomic radiation. Belarus highly valued the positive aspects of the peaceful use

of atomic energy in various spheres, including sustainable energy, medicine and agriculture. In 2007, it had decided to build a new nuclear power plant and a special department on nuclear and radiation safety had been established for that purpose. Belarus complied with the radiation protection standards elaborated by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Commission on Radiological Protection.

61. Belarusian scientists were regularly invited to participate in sessions of the Scientific Committee, as the primary international body studying the effects of atomic radiation. Noting that the report of the Secretary-General addressing the financial and administrative implications of increased membership and staffing of the Scientific Committee's secretariat had only just been issued, he said that his delegation reserved the right to return to the issue once it had studied the report.

62. **Mr. Tsuruga** (Japan) said that the work of the Scientific Committee had provided a global scientific standard for evaluating radiation risk and establishing radiation protection and safety standards. In order to mark the publication of reports approved at the fifty-fourth and fifty-sixth sessions of the Scientific Committee, his Government was planning shortly to hold a symposium on the role of the Scientific Committee in the age of the new atomic energy use.

63. The Scientific Committee must continue to study the effects of radiation, so as to ensure the safety and security of human beings and the environment, as well as to promote public health in the use of radiation for medical purposes. His delegation therefore believed that UNEP should review and strengthen the current funding of the Scientific Committee, in addition to considering a voluntary, temporary mechanism to complement existing ones.

64. Before discussing the possibility of expanding the membership of the Scientific Committee, necessary qualifications for membership must be clarified, and the financial and administrative implications of increased membership must be evaluated. In that connection, his delegation looked forward to reading the report of the Secretary-General on the subject.

The meeting rose at 12.18 p.m.