

**GENERAL
ASSEMBLY**

TWENTY-SEVENTH SESSION

Official Records

MEETING



*Wednesday, 4 October 1972,
at 3.20 p.m.*

NEW YORK

Chairman: Mr. Hady TOURÉ (Guinea).

In the absence of the Chairman, Mr. Carasales (Argentina), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

AGENDA ITEM 39

Effects of atomic radiation: report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (A/8725 and Corr.1)

1. The CHAIRMAN said that the Committee would begin its consideration of the items on the agenda of the General Assembly that the Assembly had allocated to it, starting with the item on the effects of atomic radiation. It had before it the report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (A/8725 and Corr. 1).
2. MR. MCGEE (United States of America) said that the report of the Scientific Committee—its sixth report—could be commended to the attention of everyone interested in the subject, whether they belonged to the scientific community, the public at large or the information media. The portion—paragraphs 12 to 31 of the report—dealing with man-made environmental radiation was a particularly interesting one; it was important to compare it with paragraph 8, which stated that despite the increasing importance of such sources—atmospheric and surface nuclear weapon tests, power production from nuclear fission, peaceful nuclear explosions and medical and occupational exposure—the fact remained that “natural sources are the main contributors to the radiation exposure of most of the human population and are likely to remain so in the foreseeable future”.
3. At its twenty-second session, held from 13 to 24 March 1972, the Scientific Committee had recognized that its work could well become a key element in the environmental strategy of the United Nations, to which it had offered its services. It had also considered that it could discharge its responsibilities while reporting less frequently to the General Assembly. The members of the Committee were engrossed in their research and wished to avoid any unnecessary meetings; his delegation shared that view and therefore supported the Committee’s decision not to meet before the end of 1973 unless it was asked to undertake new tasks.
4. Mr. WILLIAMS (United Kingdom) recalled that at the last two sessions the Special Political Committee had had before it only concise interim reports from the Scientific Committee, while the latter’s report at the current session represented the results of three years of work and analysed in detail recent data on radiation, whether natural or man-made, to which the human population was exposed. It also dealt with the biological effects of such radiation and particularly its genetic effects and its effects on the immune response, as well as radiation carcinogenesis. The Scientific Committee’s extremely comprehensive report made it possible to undertake an assessment of the existing hazards, which it helped to make better known. He paid a tribute to the Scientific Committee’s constructive and valuable work, stressing the significant contribution made by the United Nations Secretariat, and particularly by the secretary of the Scientific Committee. He recalled that the Scientific Committee had submitted to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment a basic paper on the assessment and control of environmental contamination, and its secretary had taken part in the work of the Conference secretariat. He noted the Scientific Committee’s view that it could make a useful contribution to the environmental strategy of the United Nations within its current terms of reference. He was pleased with the fruitful co-operation established between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Scientific Committee.
5. The Scientific Committee had requested authorization not to meet before the end of 1973; his delegation had no objection and felt that the General Assembly, in deciding that question, should be guided by the views of the Scientific Committee itself.
6. Mr. ZOHRAB (New Zealand) stressed the unique role played by the Scientific Committee in the collection and evaluation of data on the effects of atomic radiation. His delegation hoped that the work of that Committee would continue to receive the support of the United Nations and that its expertise in the field of environmental radio-active contamination and the significant contribution it could make to the environmental strategy of the United Nations would be recognized by the environmental co-ordinating body which was to be established within the United Nations. It should also maintain close contact with IAEA in order to avoid any overlapping between their respective activities.
7. The Scientific Committee had submitted a substantive report representing three years of work. Unfortunately, it had been available for only a few weeks.

so that his delegation had not been able to examine thoroughly the complex issues it dealt with. It would therefore content itself with making fragmentary comments in the hope that that aspect of the question would be borne in mind when the next substantive report was submitted.

8. The Scientific Committee had for the first time attempted to estimate the radiation dosage that would result from nuclear electric power production and had estimated the dosage level in the year 2000, thus providing objective answers to some of the questions asked both by scientists and by the public, who were aware of the risks entailed by the installation of a large number of nuclear power plants.

9. In regard to peaceful nuclear explosions, the Scientific Committee had stated that "the safety of the populations living near the site of the project, as well as long-range contamination, are powerful limiting factors, and will restrict the use of these projects unless they are overcome by major technological advances" (see A/8725, para. 21) and that "their practical applications will probably require international agreements to ensure the protection of the public" (*ibid.*, para. 19). His delegation thoroughly endorsed those conclusions but was at a loss to understand why nuclear weapon testing did not require similar restrictions and why the Scientific Committee seemed to treat such tests as though they were acts of God. By the Scientific Committee's own admission, environmental radio-active contamination was mainly due to atmospheric nuclear weapon tests. Indeed, peaceful nuclear explosions were only a relatively minor source of radiation. As to nuclear power production, according to the Scientific Committee, by the year 2000 it would expose the population only to the equivalent of one day's exposure to natural sources, and yet the advanced nations did not hesitate to spend millions of dollars to reduce that radiation dosage. Nuclear tests, on the other hand, caused radiation equivalent to approximately two years of exposure, counting only the nuclear weapon tests conducted up to the beginning of 1971; France and China, however, had conducted more atmospheric tests since then and appeared to be planning still more.

10. Moreover, while nuclear power production at least offered benefits which might offset the extra radiation doses they caused, the only "benefit" resulting from nuclear weapon tests was the intensification of the arms race; their environmental implications had already led the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm from 5 to 16 June 1972, to adopt a resolution¹ calling on States to abandon such tests, and, if not for the resistance of the two Powers to which he had referred, the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of the Sea-Bed and the Ocean Floor would have passed a resolution expressing its concern about such tests and their effects on the marine environment.

11. In the light of those considerations, his delegation was disappointed that the Scientific Committee had not attempted in its most recent report to evaluate the benefits and hazards of atmospheric nuclear weapon testing and ways of reducing the resulting contamination, as it had done with regard to other forms of man-made radiation, and found it difficult to understand the absence of any critical discussion of the subject.

12. It agreed completely with the concern to limit medical radiation doses expressed in the last sentence in paragraph 26 of the report and with the approaches outlined in paragraph 27. His country had been one of the first to start its own radiation protection programme, one object of which was the reduction of usable dosages. It had developed educational programmes and helped a number of Asian and Pacific countries to develop similar programmes.

13. The Scientific Committee had asked to be released from its obligation to report to the General Assembly in 1973; while his delegation was fully aware of the necessary budgetary limitations, it believed that so long as atmospheric nuclear weapon testing continued, the item should be kept on the agenda of the General Assembly. It was essential that the Scientific Committee should continue to evaluate the effects of nuclear explosions, which were one of the principal sources of radiation to which man was exposed, and his country would not support any decision to delete the item from the agenda of the twenty-eighth session.

14. Mr. MOLTENI (Argentina) said that his delegation had read with the greatest interest the report of the Scientific Committee, whose competence was universally recognized. The Scientific Committee must continue to study contamination levels resulting from nuclear weapon testing, but the current situation in that regard enabled it to report on the subject less frequently. His delegation felt that the normal procedure of submitting the Committee's reports to the General Assembly, which passed them to the Special Political Committee for consideration, was quite adequate, subject to any additional working relations which might be established as a result of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. The Committee wished to be relieved of the obligation to report to the General Assembly before the twenty-ninth session. The request seemed reasonable in that the Committee could meet briefly before the end of 1973 if it was assigned any new tasks pursuant to decisions taken at the Stockholm Conference, particularly with regard to the assessment of hazards resulting from environmental contamination by radio-active materials.

15. His country was taking an active part in the work of the Scientific Committee, of which it was a member, and was determined to continue to do so in the future. It had submitted scientific studies on the absorption of strontium by man, on radio-active fall-out from the explosions which had taken place in the South Pacific, on fall-out of radio-active strontium and caesium over the past 10 years, on radium as a natural source of radiation, and on an accidental case of human irradiation.

¹ See document A/CONF/48/14, part one, chap. IV, resolution 3 (I).

tion. During the technical discussions, his delegation had provided information on occupational exposure in uranium mines and in nuclear laboratories and factories; that information had been used in the Committee's report.

16. Argentina was particularly interested in the assessment of low ambient contamination levels resulting from the development of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, particularly from the production of electric power by nuclear fission. Argentina, which had undertaken a complete programme of nuclear power station construction, hoped that the Scientific Committee would continue to make such assessments from a strictly scientific viewpoint and independently of any desire to promote those applications of nuclear energy. His delegation was still convinced that the Scientific Committee's work must be of a multidisciplinary nature; the membership of the Committee was very satisfactory in that respect and should be left unchanged. The

strictly scientific nature of its studies, which gave added prestige to its conclusions, must also be preserved.

17. The CHAIRMAN reminded members of the Special Political Committee that the programme of work provided for only two meetings on the item under discussion. There were no more speakers on his list and representatives who wished to make a statement in the debate or submit a draft resolution had only one meeting left in which to do so. That meeting would take place on Friday, 6 October. Immediately following the meeting in progress, an informal meeting would be held for delegations interested in preparing a draft resolution, which would have to be transmitted to the Secretariat by Thursday evening at the latest in order to permit distribution in all the working languages at the following meeting.

The meeting rose at 3.45 p.m.