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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Second regular session of 1990

PROVISIONAL SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 28th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva  
on Friday, 13 July 1990, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. GHAREKHAN (India)

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

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION IN THE ELIMINATION OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ACCIDENT AT THE CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER PLANT (agenda item 5) (E/1990/97; A/45/342-E/1990/102; E/1990/L.21/Rev.1)

The PRESIDENT invited the Council to consider the question of international co-operation in the elimination of the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and announced that the Bahamas, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Jamaica, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand and Trinidad and Tobago had become co-sponsors of the draft resolution entitled "International co-operation to address and ameliorate the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant" (E/1990/L.21/Rev.1).

Mr. HINTEREGGER (Executive Secretary, Economic Commission for Europe) recalled that, on 26 April 1990, the Governments of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic had requested the Secretary-General to include an item in the Council's agenda on the elimination of the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. In a draft resolution accompanying that letter, the Secretary-General had been asked to prepare, with the assistance of the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination (ACC), proposals for the implementation of a programme of international co-operation and to submit a report to the General Assembly at its forty-fifth session. The Secretary-General had further been requested to dispatch an inter-agency mission to the affected areas in order to evaluate the priority needs and to include the results of the mission in his report.

By its decision 1990/5, ACC had agreed that, if the Council adopted the above-mentioned draft resolution, the Economic Commission for Europe should assist the Secretary-General in co-ordinating the inter-agency mission in question. The Director-General for Development and International Economic Co-operation had therefore requested the Commission to assist in the preparation of the Secretary-General's report. The Commission had invited all the organizations listed in paragraph 3 of that report (E/1990/97), together with the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, to provide a brief description of their current and planned activities on the subject. All but one of the organizations had replied.

In addition to the information provided by the agencies and programmes contacted, the Secretary-General's report included a description of the work

of the Inter-Agency Committee for the Response to Nuclear Accidents (IAC/RNA) and of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation.

Mr. ESSAAFI (United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator) said that, in order to respond to the requests for assistance it had received in 1990 from the Governments of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, UNDR0 had contacted the United Nations agencies concerned with a view to developing a concerted action programme. On the eve of the fourth anniversary of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, he had called on the international community to continue and strengthen its efforts to help the Soviet authorities mitigate the consequences of the disaster. Despite the large-scale decontamination activities undertaken, the situation in the areas affected by radiation remained serious.

The territory of the Byelorussian Republic, with a population of 2.2 million, represented 70 per cent of all the affected areas in the European part of the USSR. One fifth of its agricultural land had become unusable and about 1 million hectares of forests had been affected by radiation. In the Ukrainian SSR, where 5 million hectares had been contaminated, the danger area covered 1,614 inhabited localities with a population of over 1.5 million.

The needs were enormous. The millions of persons, and particularly children, living in the contaminated areas had to be safeguarded against the radiological, medical, socio-economic, environmental and psychological effects of the disaster. Hospitals in the disaster-stricken areas needed equipment and supplies in order to cope with the increase in general somatic morbidity. Regular monitoring of health conditions in the disaster-stricken areas, as well as further decontamination campaigns and evacuation, had to be undertaken.

The Soviet authorities urgently needed foreign aid to implement their broad programme of assistance to the affected population. In particular, they needed medical equipment, drugs, food product analysis equipment and advanced technology to mitigate the effects of radiation.

UNDR0 was ready to collaborate actively in the inter-agency relief efforts by providing the necessary technical expertise for assessing requirements and ensuring the dissemination of information to the international community. In line with its mandate, it wished to collaborate with the competent United Nations agencies in the preparation of a global risk mitigation strategy for one or more of the Chernobyl-type nuclear plants in

operation. The strategy should include appropriate measures to protect the population at risk not only in the immediate vicinity of the plants, but also in the surrounding areas.

The United Nations General Assembly had proclaimed the 1990s an International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. No global effort had yet been made to combat technological and industrial disasters. However, the full consequences of the Chernobyl accident for humanity and the environment were as yet unknown. Such an accident knew no boundaries and it was to be hoped that action taken in international solidarity would be commensurate with the magnitude of the disaster.

Mr. MASYK (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) said that the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant four years earlier had divided the lives of millions of human beings into two periods: the pre-disaster and post-disaster periods. Because of its long-term consequences, the accident was the greatest technological disaster of the twentieth century. A solution must be found without delay to the problems of all kinds to which it had given rise - not only on behalf of the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, but also in the interest of all the inhabitants of the planet.

In response to the appeal made by the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic to Governments, foreign public opinion and international organizations, the Ukraine had received many offers of assistance, particularly for children. The United States and Canada had established funds for the children of Chernobyl which had made it possible to send the Ukraine more than 200 tonnes of medicines, equipment and baby food. The European Parliament had adopted a resolution for the granting of emergency assistance. UNESCO, WHO, UNEP, ECE and other United Nations bodies, as well as the League of Red Cross Societies, had also offered their assistance.

The environmental consequences of the Chernobyl accident were catastrophic. The Ukraine was encountering many problems in ensuring the country's economic survival, while the contamination threatening the Dnieper, the main source of drinking water supplies for nearly 35 million persons, was a further cause for concern.

The basic problem of Chernobyl was how to cope with the effects of the disaster on the health of the people and to determine the likely genetic consequences. It was now apparent that, despite the measures taken over the past four years, the severity of the problem had in no way diminished.

It had been impossible in the early stages to make a proper evaluation of the scale of the disaster and its consequences at all levels. Since then, the Ukrainian Government had adopted a number of measures designed to provide a normal daily life for the population of the disaster-stricken areas. In 1990-1992, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR had decided to allocate 3.6 billion roubles to the Ukraine to provide for the rehousing of families in safe areas, to improve medical services, to supply the population with "pure" foodstuffs and to decontaminate the territory.

In co-operation with UNEP, WHO and IAEA, the Ukrainian Government hoped to implement as speedily as possible the technical co-operation project for the study of the environmental and medical aspects of radiation. It also intended to participate in the establishment of an international scientific research centre on the environmental problems of nuclear energy.

It had been said that the harmful consequences of exposure to low doses of radioactivity had not been proven and that there was no need for anxiety. He did not share that view. The Bergen Ministerial Declaration had emphasized the need for strengthening international co-operation to combat the consequences of industrial disasters such as the one at Chernobyl. He drew particular attention to paragraph 7 of that Declaration, which stated that, where there were threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

His Government earnestly hoped to enjoy the co-operation of all States and international organizations such as UNDP, FAO, WHO, the ILO, UNIDO and Habitat. The effectiveness of international co-operation, and particularly of multilateral co-operation, would largely depend on co-ordination of the activities of the international organizations in that area. The special programme of international co-operation prepared by ACC would undoubtedly meet that need.

Introducing, on behalf of the sponsors, the draft resolution entitled "International co-operation to address and ameliorate the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant" (E/1990/L.21/Rev.1), he said that the original sponsors - the USSR, the Byelorussian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR - had endeavoured above all to maintain a spirit of consensus in the text. That had been difficult in view of the unprecedented nature and scale of the problems arising from the Chernobyl disaster. The sponsors had held intensive consultations in which account had been taken of the proposals

and positions of many Council members and which had made it possible to arrive at a compromise text. The essential point was that the draft resolution showed the political will of the Member States of the United Nations to unite in taking all the necessary measures to provide relief for all the victims of the disaster.

His Government would do everything possible to ensure that international co-operation in eliminating the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster was fruitful and it undertook, at the national level, to create the necessary conditions to enable the international experts to carry out their work effectively.

Mr. PETRONE (Italy), speaking on behalf of the 12 member countries of the European Economic Community, said that the Community fully supported draft resolution E/1990/L.21/Rev.1. The Twelve were well aware of the extent of the destruction caused by the Chernobyl disaster over more than 100,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory with a population of over three million. They had already expressed their solidarity to the Governments concerned and indicated their willingness to help not only with emergency relief, but also in dealing with the long-term effects of the disaster, particularly on health. The possibility of co-operation for enhancing the safety of nuclear plants had been discussed at a recent meeting held in Dublin between the EEC Ministers of the Environment and their counterparts in the Eastern European countries.

The Governments of the Soviet Union, the Byelorussian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR had made a major recovery effort, but there were still large groups of persons to be evacuated and victims to be treated. In addition, some areas that had been thought to be cleared of radioactivity had been recontaminated as a result of natural phenomena. Furthermore, as the Supreme Soviet of the USSR had itself recognized, the affected area was in a difficult socio-political situation as a result of delays that had occurred in taking the necessary protective measures.

The United Nations had proclaimed the 1990s an International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction and that initiative might usefully stimulate further international co-operation to prevent technological and industrial disasters such as the one at Chernobyl, which unquestionably called for concerted international action. The Twelve would therefore give favourable consideration to the proposals made by the USSR, the Byelorussian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR. They considered the proposal made by IAEA in May 1990 for the strengthening of international co-operation for the assessment of the medical

and social effects of the disaster to be interesting. They were also aware that the USSR and WHO had already signed a memorandum of understanding and that the USSR and the Byelorussian SSR had also sought assistance from the ILO and UNEP.

Mr. KICHKAILO (Observer for the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) said that the results of the Council's discussion would, to a considerable degree, determine the fate of 10 million Byelorussians, one out of every five of whom were threatened by the unpredictable consequences of the world's most serious nuclear accident, which had spilled more than 70 per cent of Chernobyl's radionuclides over five of the six regions of the Byelorussian SSR. That was why the Byelorussian Parliament had just declared the entire territory of the Republic a disaster area. However, the transboundary contamination of neighbouring countries and of certain other European countries gave the tragedy an international dimension. The Administrative Committee on Co-ordination had therefore rightly decided to organize international co-operation to overcome the consequences of the accident, since that was in the interest of the world community as a whole. Many countries had confirmed that interest at the recent European Environmental Forum held in Bergen, Norway.

The scale of the consequences of the disaster, which would continue well beyond the twentieth century, could not be overemphasized. It was now obvious that it would be impossible to eliminate those consequences entirely. It was therefore all the more necessary to secure the participation not only of IAEA, but of the entire United Nations system, with its technical bodies and specialized agencies, in studying the effects of the disaster in its radiological, medical, biological, ecological and, of course, human aspects. His country therefore attached great importance to the results of the international project which had been launched in February 1990 under IAEA auspices with the participation of other international organizations, and which was expected to be completed by the end of 1990.

His Government was taking steps to facilitate the research work of the inter-agency mission in which about 100 independent international experts were involved, and which was expected not only to assess the extent of the problems in the affected areas and evaluate the effectiveness of the protective measures taken at the national level so far, but also to remove the conceptual obstacles that were still impeding the implementation of relief and assistance programmes.

The problems created by the disaster had deeply undermined Byelorussia's economic development potential. The total economic damage, which was far greater than originally thought, amounted to 100 billion roubles. The greatest damage, however, resulted from the fact that 18 per cent of farm land and 20 per cent of forests were situated in the contaminated areas and it had been necessary to withdraw 300,000 hectares of arable land from agricultural production.

Since over 72 per cent of the total dose of exposure in the affected areas was due to the consumption of contaminated foodstuffs which were still being produced by the population of the Chernobyl zone, a considerable share of the aid programme would be devoted to comprehensive decontamination and other expensive measures, including relocation of the affected population, medical treatment and the supply of "pure" foodstuffs. It was obvious that Byelorussia had insufficient resources of its own for the permanent, or even temporary, resettlement of the 2.2 million persons from the vast area of contaminated territory. For the time being, the programme of compulsory resettlement for medical and biological reasons provided for the relocation of 120,000 persons. In future, however entire settlements would have to be relocated. His Government had agreed to a proposal by Habitat for the dispatch of a special mission to the Republic in August 1990 to prepare a two-year technical project for the construction of new settlements and delivery of equipment. Assistance from UNIDO would help the Byelorussian SSR to establish or expand small-scale and medium-scale industries that would offer employment to the relocated population in the uncontaminated areas. UNIDO would also help in the rehabilitation of some enterprises in the evacuated areas. The Byelorussian authorities also intended to discuss with the UNIDO services the prospects of implementing technical projects for the supply of small-capacity equipment for the production and packaging of baby foods and disposable syringes for children's health centres.

Following the submission by the original sponsors of draft resolution E/1990/L.21/Rev.1 of additional information on the socio-economic consequences of the disaster, his country had received a number of other aid proposals. The Byelorussian authorities wished to thank the European Parliament for its adoption of a resolution authorizing the dispatch of medical and food relief by the European Community and also to thank national and intergovernmental organizations, companies, associations, individuals and



the secretariats of United Nations agencies which had provided collective or individual support in various forms. The relief had been dispatched without delay to the affected areas and had all been delivered.

However, no economic or charitable assistance could fully meet his country's requirements. The Byelorussian SSR needed to find sources of convertible currency for the purchase of medical and biological equipment, medicines, radiometric and dosimetric devices, "pure" foodstuffs, vitamins, etc., and for that purpose it would seek to increase its exports in the hope that its future trading partners would take its proposals into consideration.

His country also wished to thank the 60 or so members of the Council which had co-sponsored draft resolution E/1990/L.21/Rev.1. The representative of Italy had just announced that the 12 members of the European Community supported the draft resolution. He viewed that support as a sign of strengthened international solidarity.

Mr. MARKS (United States of America) said that his country fully endorsed draft resolution E/1990/L.21/Rev.1, since it was important that the United Nations system should participate in efforts to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, to study its effects and to disseminate the results of such research. It was also important that the United Nations system should make the most effective possible use of the resources it could provide for those activities and, consequently, ensure the best possible co-ordination of such activities and the prevention of any duplication of efforts.

Generally speaking, the agencies had made a good start in that direction; the establishment, under IAEA leadership, of the Inter-Agency Committee for the Response to Nuclear Accidents (IAC/RNA) had been a wise response to the need for co-ordination. Before undertaking new activities, all the agencies should present their proposals for such activities to the IAC/RNA for its consideration. His Government committed itself to urging the governing bodies of the agencies of which it was a member to ensure such co-ordination.

Mr. NAPALKOV (World Health Organization) recalled that WHO had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Soviet Ministry of Health for the establishment of a long-term programme to mitigate the effects of the accident on the health of the persons exposed, mainly in the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, with emphasis on the clinical aspects, priority being given to medical investigation, the treatment of the exposed persons and the prevention of

certain diseases. The programme would also be concerned with the indirect medical problems arising from a disaster of that magnitude, such as mental and psychological disturbances, nutritional problems and rehabilitation, and would provide for long-term epidemiological studies and other research. It was to be undertaken with the help of scientists from the three Republics concerned. Other countries would also be able to avail themselves of the new body of clinical and scientific knowledge on radiation effects that would result from the programme. However, WHO would need the assistance of other specialized agencies, particularly the International Atomic Energy Agency, in their respective fields of competence. For a number of years, WHO and other agencies had been aware of the need for collaboration in radiation protection. The Organization had therefore an active part in the work of the Inter-Agency Committee for the Response to Nuclear Accidents, which had been established following the Chernobyl accident. That Committee, which included representatives from various international agencies, had been engaged in the planning of co-ordinated action to be taken in the event of a future accident and in considering the question of follow-up activities to the Chernobyl accident. WHO would continue to play an active role in the Committee's work.

In addition, WHO was collaborating with IAEA and other agencies in assessing the accident. It had dispatched a medical expert to participate in an initial assessment mission in March 1990 and was preparing to provide medical expertise in epidemiology, endocrinology, haematology and nuclear medicine. WHO had also been represented in the planning meetings for the establishment of the Chernobyl Centre, whose activities would be primarily concerned with the technological solution of contamination problems, but also with some aspects touching upon health. Lastly, the Directors-General of IAEA and WHO had agreed to hold regular co-ordinating meetings between the two agencies on all aspects of radiation protection.

Mr. KOIKE (Japan) said that the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant - a man-made disaster that was more complex and serious than a natural disaster - was a source of special concern to Japan. As the only country to have experienced the devastation that could be wrought by atomic energy released by instruments of war, his country felt profound sympathy for all the persons who had suffered the consequences of the accident and was concerned about its possible long-term effects on human health and the environment. That was why his delegation had decided to co-sponsor the draft resolution under consideration, which it hoped the Council would adopt by consensus.