



50 Years UNSCEAR 30 May 2006

**Remarks by Werner Burkart
Deputy Director General
International Atomic Energy Agency**

Sehr geehrter Herr Stadtrat Mailath-Pokorny, DG Costa, Dr. Blix, dear colleagues,

We are here today to celebrate 50 years of the work of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation – UNSCEAR – and on behalf of the IAEA and its Director General, Mohamed ElBaradei, I am pleased to offer congratulations to all past and present UNSCEAR members.

As we look back over the last half a century, we can clearly recognise the important events that have shaped the uses of the atom, for better or for worse. As the world moved into the so-called Cold War period, the development of nuclear weapons accelerated. The fears that such awesome weapons might be used in anger were accompanied by concerns about the possible health impacts of the tests themselves, as testing accelerated throughout the 1950's. UNSCEAR was established to address these concerns.

But there was also a strong desire to redress the balance through the promotion of peaceful and beneficial uses of nuclear technology whether for power generation or for industrial or medical purposes. In essence, there was a wish to turn swords into ploughshares. The Atoms for Peace speech of President Eisenhower, promoting the safe and peaceful uses of nuclear technology and controlling the spread of nuclear weapons, led to the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency.– This year the Agency will also start to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Both organizations, seated in Vienna, have over the years become recognized worldwide authorities in their particular areas of competence.

Today we are here to recognize the substantial contributions to science that UNSCEAR has made over the last 50 years, from those formative, albeit worrisome, days of the 1950s to the present time. 50 years of existence in itself is worth a celebration, but for an organization to have maintained such a high profile as UNSCEAR is rare. Such a profile has been obtained by adapting to the needs of society, and producing high quality work by using the best international experts in their field. Soon, UNSCEAR reports became - and remained until today - the authoritative reference documents on sources, exposures and health effects of ionizing radiation.

But the value of UNSCEAR is not simply to catalogue information. Its early reports provided the scientific foundation to the treaties prohibiting the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. More recent ones provide a basis for the work of other organizations, including the Agency.

To illustrate the farsightedness of UNSCEAR, it early on recognized the fact that medical exposures and indoor radon were major components of human-made and -enhanced radiation exposure globally. The relative significance of these exposures has continued to rise over the years, as industrial practices and military threats have subsided.

The Agency has a formal mandate for the establishment of safety standards, which need to be based on the most up-to-date information on biological effects. It is not surprising, therefore, that we have developed a close relationship with UNSCEAR. The International Basic Safety Standards for Protection against Ionizing Radiation and for the Safety of Radiation Sources, in particular, are based on the recommendations of the International Commission on Radiological Protection, which in turn, uses the comprehensive material provided by UNSCEAR as the foundation.

The work of UNSCEAR has also assisted the Agency's work in many other areas, such as radiological assessments of the legacy of the nuclear arms race, occupational exposures including that from naturally occurring radioactive material and radon, studies of the Chernobyl accident and on the biological effects of radiation exposure of non-human species.

As a former member, then consultant and finally representative to UNSCEAR, let me end with something from my heart. If UNSCEAR would not yet exist, we would have to create this body. The General Assembly of the United Nations and many others frequently express their appreciation for your work. But if there is that much light, is there also some shadow? First, there is a professional threat that in an over-audited world, the possibility for scientists to take an unpaid out-time to develop a scientific annex is largely gone. Also, due to a UN system which is contracting in many places, financial restrictions and – sometimes - benign neglect have slowed down your work and led to a missed opportunity to provide your science to the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl earlier this year. It will also be important to stay independent of the IAEA, and also be more distant to some other bodies in the nuclear field.

Yet, in a world which may see a nuclear renaissance in fission and the birth of controlled fusion, the needs of humanity for authoritative, independent and accurate information on the effects of radiation will remain high. You will be central in guiding a new and more gender-balanced generation of scientists inside and outside UNSCEAR to meet these needs.

I wish to congratulate UNSCEAR on this important anniversary – it has indeed much to celebrate - and on behalf of the Agency, I also wish the Committee success in its future work.