

50th Anniversary Reception of UNSCEAR
30 May 2006
Speech Frits Schlingemann

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Esteemed Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We are here to observe the fiftieth anniversary of UNSCEAR. This Committee has been — and continues to be — a focus of scientific excellence within the United Nations system with a well-deserved reputation for impartiality and integrity.

It was UNSCEAR that, fifty years ago, first assessed the radiological consequences for the global environment of nuclear weapon testing. The Committee went on to become the global authority on the consequences of exposure to ionizing radiation from all sources. There are few international bodies that, on technical but politically sensitive issues, have maintained for so long an unchallenged authority.

In the hope and belief that this excellence will continue to be applied to the issues of the day, what better forum than this to raise a few ideas?

Environmental issues appear ever more prominently on the global political agenda. We are all increasingly aware of the tremendous challenges posed by climate change, population growth and dwindling natural resources. There is a growing debate about the nuclear power option and radioactive waste. Twenty years ago last month it was tragically demonstrated at Chernobyl that a nuclear accident can have wide-ranging and long-lasting environmental consequences.

The conferences in Minsk and Kyiv clearly reflected our growing understanding of the consequences of the accident. However although we judge that issues such as the increasing environmental radioactivity due to americium are not significant in terms of the human radiation doses, the Ukrainian authorities are now projecting contamination maps for 2056. There will be a continuing need to anticipate and respond to these and other concerns, to monitor and analyse the situation, and to clarify and communicate the risks and potential health and environmental impacts.

New and more complex scientific results appear all the time — on the workings of genes, living cells and other biological systems. These results need ongoing scrutiny. UNSCEAR has consistently conducted excellent scientific work. Nevertheless, there is still a generally poor understanding of the risks and effects of radiation on the part of the general public and also decision-makers. We need a clear and balanced picture of what all this science means. We need scientific facts to be presented not only *truthfully* but also *honestly* and *impartially*. Honesty and impartiality require an authoritative body that does not have — and is perceived not to have — vested interests. I believe that UNSCEAR is and will continue to be that body, and that there is a pressing need to reinforce your work.

As you know, UNEP does not guide the Committee on policy matters. This role remains with the Committee and with the General Assembly. UNEP's role since 1976 has been to provide you with the infrastructure your work requires. That does not alter the fact that environment Ministers value the work of UNSCEAR as an important information source for their policy exchanges on climate change related energy scenarios and the risks thereof.

I hope that I have encouraged some reflection about how the Scientific Committee's foundation of excellence, authority, impartiality and integrity might help meet the challenges ahead and provide even greater service to the international community.

Thank you.