

United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation to mark 60th anniversary

Annual session to take place at the Vienna International Centre
from 27 June to 1 July 2016

VIENNA, 23 June (UN Information Service) –The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) will commemorate its 60th anniversary during its annual session to be held in Vienna, Austria, from 27 June to 1 July 2016.

The Mayor and Governor of Vienna, Michael Häupl, will host a reception for high-level dignitaries, diplomats and scientists at the City Hall to mark the occasion. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which administers the Secretariat of the Committee, will launch a booklet titled “Radiation: Effects and Sources” meant as a layperson’s guide to understanding the subject of radiation in the course of the evening.

“From assessing the significance of fall-out in the 1950s, to evaluating the effects of radiation on the human genome today, the Committee has always taken an independent and impartial approach. This is crucial on issues that are often highly emotional and political,” said United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a message to mark the occasion.

“UNSCEAR’s role has evolved greatly from a time where there was not enough information on the effects of radiation, to today, where there is too much information. This makes the Committee’s work even more vital, because it has to carefully examine the information available, separating facts from opinions, and distilling only quality data into its reports,” said Yoshiharu Yonekura, Chair of UNSCEAR.

During its week-long session, the Committee will discuss a range of technical matters including its methodology for estimating human exposures due to radioactive discharges; radiation exposures from electricity generation; biological effects of tritium and uranium, and developments since its 2013 UNSCEAR Report on the levels and effects of radiation exposure due to the nuclear accident in Fukushima.

Background information:

UNSCEAR was established by a United Nations General Assembly resolution unanimously approved in 1955, to collect and evaluate information on the levels and effects of exposure to ionizing radiation. At the time, the global arms race was escalating, and there was a high level of concern about nuclear weapons testing and its impact with regard to exposure to radiation. UNSCEAR’s first two reports to the United Nations General Assembly, in 1958 and 1962, provided an overview of human radiation exposure at that time, and laid the scientific grounds on which the Partial Test Ban Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapon testing in the atmosphere was negotiated and signed in 1963.

The Committee recognized in its first report of 1958 that medical diagnostic and therapeutic exposures were a major component of artificial radiation exposure globally, a fact that remains true today. The Committee has continued to systematically review and evaluate global and regional levels and trends of medical exposure, as well as exposure of the public and workers.

Over the decades, UNSCEAR has become the official international authority on the levels and effects of exposure to ionizing radiation resulting from natural and artificial sources. It provides policy-relevant assessments, but is not involved in deciding policy.

Other key activities included evaluating the evidence for radiation-induced health effects from studies of the survivors of the atomic bombings in Japan in 1945 and other exposed groups. These reviews prompted significant worldwide reductions in unnecessary radiation exposure, and continue to influence the programmes of various international bodies working in the fields of human health, nuclear energy and radiation protection. Other work included authoritative assessments of the radiological consequences of the 1986 accident at Chernobyl and, a comprehensive overview of the levels and effects of exposure following the 2011 accident at Fukushima, including a follow-up white paper.

Scientists from 27 countries currently constitute the Committee, which is a subsidiary body of the General Assembly. They work on behalf of the United Nations. Many more countries and international organizations supply information for the Committee's work. The UNSCEAR secretariat is based in Vienna, and is administered by UNEP.

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