

UNITED NATIONS SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION
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WEB SITE: www.unscear.org**PRESS BACKGROUNDER****UNIS VIENNA: 16 FEBRUARY 2006****UNSCEAR turns fifty**

The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) was established by the General Assembly in 1955. It is the world authority concerning levels and effects of ionizing radiation. Governments and organizations throughout the world rely on the Committee's assessments as the scientific basis for evaluating radiation risks and establishing protection measures. The UNSCEAR secretariat is based in Vienna, although it is linked functionally to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi. UNSCEAR is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

On 3 December 1955 the UN General Assembly established a Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) in response to concerns regarding the effects of ionizing radiation on health and the environment. At that time fallout from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests was reaching people through air, water and food. The Committee's mandate was to collect and evaluate information on the levels and effects of ionizing radiation. The first session of the Committee was held from 14 to 23 March 1956 in New York. Its first two substantive reports submitted to the General Assembly, in 1958 and 1962, 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.

Over the decades that followed this important first achievement, UNSCEAR became the world authority on the **global levels and effects of ionizing radiation**. It evaluated any activity involving radiation exposure, either for peaceful or military purposes, as well as exposure derived from natural as well as man-made sources. Governments and organizations rely on the Committee's reports to the General Assembly as the scientific basis for evaluating radiation risks and establishing protection measures. Year after year, the General Assembly has expressed its appreciation of the Committee's functions and evaluations.

The Committee systematically reviews and evaluates global and regional levels and trends of public exposure, as well as exposure of those occupationally exposed and patients undergoing diagnosis or therapy. The Committee has regularly evaluated the evidence for radiation-induced health effects from studies of the survivors of the atomic bombings in Japan in 1945 and other exposed groups. It also reviews advances in scientific understanding of the mechanisms by which radiation-induced health effects can occur. These assessments have provided the scientific foundation used by national and international bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization, in establishing radiation protection policy, standards, and practice.

The Chernobyl accident in 1986 was a tragic event for its victims and there has been major hardship for those most affected. From early on, UNSCEAR was involved in the assessment of radiation exposures and health effects. In 1988 it published a first account of acute radiation effects in emergency workers and of the global exposures. A more detailed assessment of radiation levels and effects from the accident was published in 2000. The Committee concluded that the vast majority of people, even those in areas most affected by Chernobyl fallout, need not fear major radiological impact on their health. More recently the Committee has participated in the Chernobyl Forum, whose conclusions essentially concur with those of the UNSCEAR 2000 report. The Committee will surely continue its work to provide the scientific basis for better understanding of the radiation health effects.

In the last decade, attention has been focused on the radiological legacy of the cold war, with assessments of the radioactive residues from weapons production and testing, and on hereditary effects of radiation. More recently, occupational exposure from work with naturally occurring radioactive material, and exposure from new medical procedures are receiving attention. Biological effects after low doses of radiation, risks of exposure to radon gas, and the effects on non-human species are also under review.

Since its inception, the international community has held UNSCEAR's authoritative reports in high regard. UNSCEAR's programme of work envisages issuing in the coming year reviews of new information on radiation effects, including: the risks from exposure to radon; cancer and non-cancer effects; and genetic and cellular responses to radiation exposure.

Twenty-one countries provide the present membership of the Committee, working on behalf of the United Nations. More than 50 national organizations and several international organizations provide considerable contributions in kind. The small Secretariat in Vienna, which is functionally linked to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) organizes the annual sessions and manages the preparation of documents for the Committee's scrutiny. The 54th session of UNSCEAR will be held at the Vienna International Centre from 29 May to 2 June 2006, and will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the first session.

The mandate of UNSCEAR does not include promotional or protection related matters, these being the prerogative of other international bodies. This helps to distinguish the Committee's responsibility for scientific matters from issues relating to policy development. In this regard UNSCEAR prides itself on its independence and scientific objectivity.

Nowadays with the flood of new information available comes the crucial need to review and synthesize it, and to build a coherent description of current knowledge for use by policy makers and other stakeholders. With important decisions concerning new medical uses of radiation, emergency preparedness, environmental restoration, waste disposal and the nuclear power option, the central role of the Committee in efficiently developing a coherent understanding of radiation levels and effects will be crucial in the future.

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