

## **United Nations Scientific Body still Tracks Radiation 50 Years on**

VIENNA, 13 March (UN Information Service) -- Just over 50 years ago, in the heat of the global arms race, concerned scientists advised their governments about the dangers of radioactive fallout from testing nuclear weapons. From those talks, a group was born that today stands as the world's authoritative voice on radiation levels and effects – the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR). This year UNSCEAR marks the golden anniversary of its first session, held in New York from 14 to 23 March 1956.

UNSCEAR's first two reports to the United Nations General Assembly, in 1958 and 1962, summed up the knowledge of human radiation exposure at that time. The reports 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, UNSCEAR became the official international authority on the levels and effects of ionizing radiation, used for peaceful as well as military purposes and derived from natural as well as artificial sources.

UNSCEAR's findings and activities include:

- Recognition that medical diagnostic and therapeutic exposures are a major component of artificial radiation exposure globally. The Committee systematically reviews and evaluates global levels and trends of medical exposure, as well as exposure of the public and workers, to all sources of ionizing radiation.
- Regular evaluations of 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 biological mechanisms by which radiation-induced health effects can occur. These evaluations provide the scientific basis for radiation risk assessment and global protection standards.
- Authoritative assessments of the radiological consequences of the 1986 Chernobyl accident. The Committee also participates in the work of the Chernobyl Forum, launched to contribute to the United Nations strategy for recovery.
- Periodically published reports that influence programmes of governments and international bodies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Labour Organization, World Health Organization and the International Commission on Radiological Protection.

"In the early days, governments were very hesitant to talk about radiation," remarks Dr. Yasuhito Sasaki from Japan, the present Chairman of the Committee. "However, UNSCEAR meetings were one place where information would be exchanged for the good of humankind. Of course, after the cold war, things are different," he says. "In many ways, with the Internet and rapid advances in the biological sciences, the problem is almost too much information. I believe UNSCEAR now has a different but perhaps even more important role. The Committee scrutinizes the information available – separating the good from the bad, and the facts from opinion. It then calmly tries to build a coherent and unbiased picture of the levels and effects of radiation exposure for governments facing important decisions,

ranging from new medical imaging technologies to the nuclear power option to planning for malicious attacks.”

Since its inception, the international community has held the Committee’s authoritative reports in high regard. Over the coming year, UNSCEAR plans to issue reviews of the risks of radon; epidemiological studies of radiation and its cancer and non-cancer effects; and cellular responses to radiation exposure. The next major review for the General Assembly is in 2007.

UNSCEAR’s mandate in the United Nations system is limited to assessing levels and effects of exposure to ionizing radiation. It does not address the benefits of radiation technology or protection related matters, these being the prerogative of other international bodies. This distinguishes the Committee’s responsibility for scientific matters from issues relating to policy development. UNSCEAR prides itself on its independence and scientific objectivity.

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 are involved in its work. The small UNSCEAR Secretariat is based in Vienna, although it is linked functionally to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi. The 54th session of UNSCEAR will be held at the Vienna International Centre from 29 May to 2 June 2006, on which occasion the Mayor of Vienna is to host a reception for high-level dignitaries, diplomats and scientists.

\* \* \* \* \*

For information contact:

**Malcolm Crick**  
Secretary of the Committee, UNSCEAR  
Telephone: + 43 1 26060 4330  
E-mail: [malcolm.crick@unscear.org](mailto:malcolm.crick@unscear.org)

**Nancy Sekolec**  
Editorial Assistant, UNSCEAR  
Telephone: + 43 1 26060 4331  
E-mail: [nancy.sekolec@unscear.org](mailto:nancy.sekolec@unscear.org)

Or visit the UNSCEAR website at:  
[www.unscear.org](http://www.unscear.org)