

UN radiation experts respond to people's concerns in Fukushima

VIENNA, 24 February 2016 -- "Farmers in Iwaki are concerned that their offspring will abandon the family because they are worried about continued external exposure". "I am a schoolteacher and when we were evacuated, we were taken along a route which was later determined to have exposed us. Do the children in my class need to be worried? What should I tell their parents?" "Parents continue to drive the children left in the prefecture to school instead of letting them take the 20 minute walk, because of fears of exposure. Is driving safer than walking?"

These and a host of other such questions were fielded by the Secretary of the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) Malcolm Crick, and experts Mikhail Balonov (Russia) and Gillian Hirth (Australia) at a series of events held in Fukushima Prefecture, Japan, earlier in February.

The team met with audiences of professionals drawn from medicine, academia, education and other fields to hear their concerns and answer their questions in Iwaki City (9 Feb) and Minamisoma City (10 Feb). They also shared the main findings of the [2013 UNSCEAR Report](#) titled "Levels and Effects of Radiation Exposure due to the nuclear accident after the 2011 great east-Japan earthquake and tsunami" and the follow up [2015 White Paper](#).

"This was a triple tragedy – the earthquake, the tsunami and then the accident at the nuclear power plant. While UNSCEAR cannot comment on policy issues, it can provide information that can help the community better understand the effects and risks of exposure," said Mr. Crick.

From the active question and answers sessions in both cities, it was evident that almost five years down the line, there are still many concerns about radiation exposure. From grappling with the immediate aftermath of the incident, concerns have shifted to those of a more practical, yet poignant nature. Apart from concerns related to thyroid cancer among children, questions covered a range of topics from external exposure, to exposure along evacuation routes, whether local food was safe for consumption and more.

Expert Mikhail Balonov shared his wealth of experience from the Chernobyl accident, while Gillian Hirth spoke on environmental issues.

"It is well known that some children residing in the areas most affected by the Chernobyl accident contracted thyroid cancer because of high internal doses during the first month. No other adverse health effect caused by radiation was noted over the next three decades and no such effects should be expected in Japan either," said Mr. Balonov. The levels of exposure in Chernobyl were 10 to 100 times higher than at Fukushima.

“For me, the experience of first-hand discussion with the people of the cities of Iwaki and Minamisoma reinforced the importance of a continued dialogue with the affected communities ,” added Ms. Hirth. “Also, I feel these dialogues assisted me, as a scientist, to understand what we can provide to support the ongoing recovery from this tragedy.”

UNSCEAR had previously held similar events in Fukushima City and Koriyama City in September 2014. Among other things, the 2013 Report had concluded that, overall, it expected cancer rates to remain stable, and commented on a theoretical small increased risk of thyroid cancer among most exposed children.

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