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COMMUNICATION FROM THE PERMANENT MISSION OF BELARUS TO THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY CONCERNING CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT FOR BELARUS

The Director General has received a communication dated 27 March 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Belarus to the Agency and, as requested therein, the text of a statement by the Governor for Belarus is attached hereto, for the information of Member States.

For reasons of economy, this document has been printed in a limited number.
Delegates are kindly requested to bring their copies of documents to meetings.

Statement by the Governor of Belarus, Mr. V. Tsalko,
to the IAEA Board of Governors (21 March 2001)

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to take this opportunity, in the light of the forthcoming fifteenth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, to focus your attention on the consequences that the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station has had for the Republic of Belarus, and on the role which the Agency has played and continues to play in minimizing those consequences.

Very few people are able to comprehend the true scale of the disaster which our country is experiencing even now. Here are just a few facts and figures.

In all, 23% of the territory of the Republic of Belarus, on which about 20% of our population live, was contaminated with caesium-137 in a concentration of more than 37 kBq/m².

We have been forced to discontinue economic use of more than 6000 km² of land, including almost 3000 km² of agricultural land, and to abandon 415 settlements in the confiscated and evacuated areas.

The "Chernobyl" regions of Belarus are characterized by a distorted demographic structure. More than 135 000 people have been resettled. A further 200 000 or so have been forced to relocate, leaving the contaminated areas themselves. The most rapid exodus from the contaminated regions has been and continues to be by young people, intellectuals and qualified specialists. In some of the worst affected regions, old age pensioners account for around 70% of the population (for the country as a whole the figure is around 26%).

The list is endless but one thing is clear - although many people think of the Chernobyl accident as a thing of the past, it is still continuing to have a negative impact on all spheres of life of the population of Belarus.

A great deal has changed since 1986. Global changes have affected many countries in the world, including Belarus. The new States, which have sprung up on the territory of the former USSR, are experiencing difficulties in transferring from a plan to a market economy system. In Belarus, the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster have coincided with economic difficulties caused by the collapse of the USSR, and the destruction of former State and social structures. We are having to resolve a multitude of social and economic problems, to build the Belarus State and, in the process, do everything possible to minimize the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

There is still much work to be done under the recently adopted new State programme of the Republic of Belarus to minimize and overcome the consequences of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant for 2001-2005, and the period up to 2010.

The doses received by the population, together with the psychological stress and other detrimental effects, are causing the health of the population in the affected regions, especially children, to deteriorate. Prolonged exposure to low radiation doses is believed to increase the body's susceptibility to other harmful factors (lead, nitrates, and so on). In addition to the "liquidators" and the evacuated population, the high-risk group includes all those living in contaminated areas.

It should be pointed out that the chief radiological and medical consequences were traditionally thought to be radiation-induced oncological diseases, but in the past few years more and more data have appeared indicating that radiation can be the cause of a whole range of non-oncological diseases. Numerous data show serious health problems in the "liquidators", evacuees and people living in contaminated areas. A growth in morbidity indicators is observed for almost all the main diseases of the circulatory, respiratory, digestive, endocrine, nervous, urinogenital and other systems.

It is extremely difficult to establish a reliable link between the radiation factor, the radiation dose and morbidity. The unprecedented growth in the number of cases of disease of the thyroid gland in children in Belarus demonstrates that we do not know enough about the possible radiological consequences of nuclear accidents. The World Health Organization only acknowledged the existence of a radiation-induced pathology in relation to cancer of the thyroid gland in Belarus in November 1995. The example of cancer of the thyroid gland has clearly shown that the risks of disease and mortality from radiation have been underestimated, especially in the case of chronic low-dose exposure. According to up-to-date assessments, the latent period for developing radiation-induced malignant neoplasms is approximately ten years. This means that for the population of our country, irradiated as a result of the Chernobyl accident, 1996 marked the start of more intensive manifestation of the negative consequences of exposure. It is not clear how much more time will be needed to prove the radiation-related origin of other pathologies. However, if we wait, if we waste time, the health of many generations may be threatened.

The scale of the post-Chernobyl problems far exceeds available resources, although the amount currently being spent on eliminating the consequences of the disaster represents about 6% of budgetary expenditure. Belarus has always relied on constructive co-operation with the IAEA.

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to reflect briefly on the history of the development of co-operation between Belarus and the Agency in relation to the Chernobyl issue.

As you know, the results of the International Chernobyl Project were interpreted differently both in Belarus and in the world. This was reflected in the preamble to the "Chernobyl" resolution adopted at the 46th session of the United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/46/150, which noted "the various assessments of the radiological consequences of the

Chernobyl accident, in particular the report of the International Advisory Committee that was presented and discussed at the conference held at Vienna from 21 to 24 May 1991” and recognized “the need for further study”.

In paragraph 1(c) of resolution A/RES/45/190 of 14 January 1991[sic], the General Assembly called on the Secretary-General to “set up a task force responsible for stimulating and monitoring the activities of the United Nations system [in connection with the consequences of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant]”. An interinstitutional task force was set up in April 1991 and its first meeting took place on 24 May 1991. The IAEA has been part of this task force since its establishment.

A major contribution by the Agency to resolving post-Chernobyl problems is the “Prussian blue” project carried out by the IAEA, together with the FAO and Norwegian specialists, to reduce meat and milk contamination by introducing iron cyanides into animals to absorb caesium-137. This is still being used on a wide scale in Belarus and helps reduce meat and milk production losses considerably. In actual conditions of use, this countermeasure, which on average reduces the caesium-137 content of milk by a factor of three, has proven its effectiveness.

This countermeasure, together with the provision of feed crop areas, has led to a steady decline in the number of places where caesium-137 levels in milk samples from the private sector in excess of those permitted nationally have been recorded.

In the past few years, there has been a shift towards new projects in qualitative terms, designed to solve the most urgent problems linked to the rehabilitation of contaminated areas.

Among them, I would like to highlight in particular the active Model Project on the production of edible oil from rapeseed grown on contaminated areas, which aims to contribute to the economic regeneration of affected regions. A production line is planned to go into operation in April this year.

Under the Model Project on the rehabilitation of Chernobyl-affected areas, specific problems are being solved at local level (monitoring of radionuclide content, especially strontium, in food products, directly in the region where this problem is most acute, decontamination of premises and public buildings, and so on).

Under a regional project, an important - from our point of view - draft guide has been drawn up on decontamination of rural settlements some considerable time after radioactive contamination by long-lived radionuclides. For us this is a valid document since the work involved has not come to an end and will in fact continue for as long as there is a need. This document will be examined at a special meeting of decision-makers and experts, which will take place in Vienna on 22 and 23 March 2001.

To sum up, I would like to say the following:

The Republic of Belarus values highly the constructive approach taken recently by the Agency to our country's post-Chernobyl problems. This is demonstrated by the visit of Deputy Director General Qian to affected regions of Belarus, the adoption of General Conference resolution GC(44)/RES/15 entitled "Radiological criteria for long-lived radionuclides in commodities (especially foodstuffs and wood)", and also the number of pragmatic and well-balanced regional and national technical co-operation projects;

We rely on the Agency to play an active role in the United Nations interinstitutional task force on Chernobyl;

We hope that the Director General, Mr. ElBaradei, will be able to accept the invitation of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus and visit our country this year.

I also wish to express the hope that the IAEA will continue to address the Chernobyl issue in future.

Thank you.