

UNITED NATIONS

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UNITED NATIONS SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON THE EFFECTS OF ATOMIC RADIATION

VIENNA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
P.O.BOX 500, A-1400 VIENNA, AUSTRIA

TEL: 0043 (1) 26060 / 4330

FAX: 0043 (1) 26060 / 5902

6 June 2000

Sir,

I write to you as Chairman of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), which has just concluded its 49th session in Vienna. As you know, UNSCEAR is the body within the United Nations system with a mandate from the General Assembly to assess and report levels and health effects of exposure to ionizing radiation.

The Committee has taken note of a publication by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) entitled "Chernobyl - a continuing catastrophe" (*OCHA/99/20, New York and Geneva, 2000*). This report is full of unsubstantiated statements that have no support in scientific assessments. I should therefore like to draw your attention to the Committee's finding with regard to the radiological consequences of the Chernobyl accident.

It is true, the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant is the most serious accident involving radiation exposure. It caused the deaths, within a few days or weeks, of 30 workers and radiation injuries to hundred others. It also brought about the immediate evacuation of about 116,000 people from areas surrounding the reactor, and the permanent relocation of about 220,000 people from Belarus, the Russian Federation, and the Ukraine. Moreover, the accident caused serious social and psychological disruption in the lives of those affected.

To date, the only substantiated radiation-related health effect in the general population following the accident has been a sharp increase in childhood thyroid cancer, particularly in the severely contaminated areas of the three affected countries. The OCHA report states that over 11,000 cases of thyroid cases have already been reported. According to UNSCEAR's scientific assessments, there have been about 1,800 cases, and if the current trend continues there may be more cases during the next decades.

Apart from this increase in thyroid cancer in children, there is no evidence of a major public health impact attributable to radiation exposure 14 years after the Chernobyl accident. There is no scientific evidence of increases in overall cancer incidence or mortality or in non-malignant disorders that could be associated with radiation exposure. The risk of leukaemia, one of the main concerns owing to its short latency time, does not appear to be elevated, not even among the recovery operation workers. Although those most highly exposed individuals are at an increased risk of radiation-associated effects, the great majority of the population are not likely to experience serious health consequences from radiation from the Chernobyl accident.

May I also remind you that the United Nations (through its Department of Humanitarian Affairs), UNSCEAR, UNESCO, UNEP, FAO and several other organizations within the United Nations family, such as WHO and IAEA, as well as the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, co-operated in the organization of the International Conference "One Decade After Chernobyl" which was held in Vienna in 1996. This Conference concluded with an authoritative summing up of the consequences of the Chernobyl accident. UNSCEAR has just adopted its 2000 Report to the General Assembly with scientific annexes, one of which, entitled "Exposures and effects of the Chernobyl accident", updates and confirms the findings of that Conference and its general conclusions.

The OCHA report also claims that “very little is known about the long-term health effects of exposure to radiation because it is a relatively new phenomenon”. This is also an inaccurate statement. More is known about radiation than for almost any other carcinogen. UNSCEAR has, since its establishment in 1955, reported every year to the General Assembly on the risk of harm to health and the environment attributable to radiation exposure. The Committee has also every four or five years submitted Reports to the General Assembly with detailed scientific annexes. This clearly shows that the General Assembly and the United Nations system – including OCHA – has had a steady stream of scientific information regarding the levels and effects of radiation over the last 45 years.

Moreover, OCHA states that the radiation in the contaminated areas around Chernobyl has changed the genetic material (DNA) in voles so much that it would be equivalent to 15 million years of evolution. It is highly remarkable that an organization in the United Nations system can publish such scientifically unfounded statements.

The incorrect information spread by OCHA hits populations that are already afflicted by rumours and have fears about the future. The United Nations system has a responsibility to reduce human suffering and to see to it that the affected populations are not unnecessarily scared by unfounded rumours. The OCHA report rather increases the fears in the affected populations, instead of acting as their support.

Accept, Sir, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Lars-Erik Holm, M.D., Ph.D.  
Chairman of UNSCEAR  
(Director-General of the  
Swedish Radiation Protection Institute)

Mr. Kofi A. Annan  
Secretary-General  
United Nations  
866 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017  
U.S.A.

cc: Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello  
Under-Secretary-General  
United Nations, New York