

U.S. Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel B. Poneman
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
IAEA Nuclear Safety Ministerial
Monday, June 20, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for your work in organizing this important Conference and to Director General Amano and his staff for convening. It has brought together the global community in an important first step to conduct a comprehensive international assessment of the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station.

Before I begin, I'd like to extend my condolences to the thousands of Japanese victims from the earthquake and tsunami. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Japanese people, who have exemplified the deep courage and force of their national character in how they have responded to this crisis. Japan is a close friend and ally of the United States, and we will continue to support its efforts to recover from these unprecedented disasters.

I would also like to thank the International Atomic Energy Agency for its leadership in promoting international nuclear cooperation and coordinating the international efforts to respond to Fukushima.

The IAEA's broad expertise in the international nuclear safety arena and the Agency's existing authority to coordinate global nuclear standards make them uniquely qualified to lead the analysis of the international lessons learned at Fukushima and to organize future discussions on how to strengthen the international safety regime.

All of us here today understand that safety must be integral at every step of the way as we design, build and operate our nuclear facilities. Fukushima reminded us that a nuclear accident anywhere is a nuclear accident everywhere, which is why you saw nations around the world – including many of my colleagues gathered here today – join together to support the Japanese in their time of crisis.

It is also why this week's conference is so important.

By working in partnership with one another to share our technical analyses and establish working groups staffed by our countries' respective nuclear experts, scientists, policymakers, and regulators, we are helping to make nuclear energy safer everywhere.

As one of the few large-scale, carbon-free sources of energy available for deployment today, safe, secure, nuclear power continues to have an important role to play in addressing global climate change.

The U.S. and many countries around the world have already taken initial steps to assess their existing reactor fleets and to help improve the safety and security of their facilities in the short-term.

Through the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, for instance, the United States is conducting a careful safety review of all 104 operating U.S. nuclear reactors to assess safety protocols and emergency preparedness capabilities. We will then continue to operate the plants that pass that review. Other countries, like France, China, Russia, and Japan are taking similar measures, which we applaud.

The government of Japan has also informed us of the steps it is taking to strengthen the safety of the country's nuclear power plants, including new emergency safety measures and backup electricity and cooling systems across its existing reactor fleet and bolstering the independence of its Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency. We welcome these commitments.

Through this ministerial – and future actions through the IAEA – we will generate wide-ranging lessons learned that will inform our collective actions to strengthen the international nuclear regulatory regime. As was the case with past nuclear accidents, once complete, this careful scientific analysis of the Fukushima accident will increase the already high level of safety moving forward.

As President Obama has made clear, the United States continues to support nuclear energy's role as part of a diversified, low-carbon energy portfolio, and as a way to dramatically reduce global air pollution and promote energy security.

But President Obama has also made clear that we must remain always focused on how we can continue to improve the safety of our nuclear facilities, to bolster our emergency preparedness plans, and to expand our response capabilities both in the U.S. and abroad.

This will require sustained vigilance and constant focus by industry, national regulators, and the international community. The IAEA has an essential role to play in this effort. The relevant international conventions on nuclear safety and emergency response form the backbone of the international nuclear safety cooperation framework. The IAEA's comprehensive Safety Standards Series is a key product of this cooperation.

It is within this international framework that national regulators can then develop and implement domestic safety regulations, fostered by international best practices, which strengthen safety by taking into account the specifics of their country's reactor fleet, such as reactor type, natural geology, and environmental factors.

Allowing national regulators the flexibility to develop tailored and targeted regulations for their domestic fleets will foster a robust, performance-based, risk-based approach to nuclear safety globally.

Our regulators need to learn from each other, share best practices and methodologies that will help increase transparency, and improve the overall safety of our nuclear reactors.

The nuclear industry and organizations such as the World Association of Nuclear Operators also need to examine how they can improve and expand their peer review capacities and international exchanges.

As I mentioned, a series of existing binding, international conventions, such as the Convention on Nuclear Safety, the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident, and the Convention on Assistance in the Case of Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency, all benefit from the relevant IAEA standards.

We would urge all countries that have not yet joined these Conventions to do so and those who are Parties to the Conventions to review their implementation. And we look forward to the

participating in review processes for these important mechanisms that will take into account the lessons learned from Fukushima once the analysis is complete.

The IAEA is uniquely positioned to coordinate a global lessons-learned effort on nuclear safety procedures and examine ways to improve international cooperation among emergency responders. By building on IAEA's existing capacity in these areas and enhancing its peer review assessment capability, we can best leverage the Agency's authority on the international stage and its depth of experience to strengthen the nuclear safety and emergency preparedness protocols in place in national regulatory programs worldwide.

An international nuclear safety regime cannot succeed through the IAEA and national regulators alone, however. Nuclear energy companies and the broader international nuclear energy industry will continue to play a central role in both preventing and responding to any accident. They truly operate at the front lines, and they possess the deep knowledge about safety in the field that only comes from first-hand experience.

We saw this clearly in the aftermath of the Fukushima crisis when the entire international nuclear community – from both the public and private sectors – responded to support the Japanese.

This is the kind of conduct we would hope to see during an emergency, but it also emphasized the need for a global nuclear liability regime, based on the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage, also known as the CSC.

The CSC has been developed to include and address the concerns of all States that might be affected by a nuclear incident. It assures victims will receive prompt and equitable compensation in the event of an accident without protracted litigation.

The CSC also helps prevent accidents by permitting operators, suppliers and investors to work together on nuclear projects as part of a harmonious and stable international legal environment, as well as to protect companies that offer their assistance to others in the industry during a nuclear accident.

In the case of Fukushima, companies from around the world responded immediately and without hesitation. But it is only common sense and common courtesy that these same companies would not then be held liable for providing their assistance.

To conclude, my colleagues and I from the United States are looking forward to working with each of you in the coming days to begin the technical analysis of the Fukushima accident and emergency response, to share preliminary information from our individual reviews and assessments, and help identify steps that should be taken to strengthen the global nuclear safety framework.

Thank you.

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