

Speech on behalf of Under-Secretary-General/Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme to the Fukushima Ministerial Conference on Nuclear Safety, 15-17 December 2012, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan

President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Achim Steiner, I would like to express again UNEP's solidarity with the government and people of Japan, and continuing support for the work to overcome the major environmental impact of the tsunami, including assessing and addressing the significant chemical and other environmental hazards created.

Our focus at this meeting is, of course, the damage to the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear plant and the releases of radioactive material to the environment that exacerbated the challenges presented by the natural disaster itself.

As had occurred after the 1986 Chernobyl accident, what was already a serious national crisis was also one of international environmental concern: significant discharges of radioactive material to the Pacific, impacts on farming, fisheries, trade and tourism, widespread concerns about food, public health and the wider environment.

From the Chernobyl experience, we foresee public distress and anxiety, and concerns about the long-term implications.

We believe that the work of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (so-called "UNSCEAR"), for which UNEP provides the secretariat, to conduct an independent and authoritative assessment of the consequences for health and the environment will be an important benchmark. UNSCEAR's work is reaching its final phase now and its report should provide a sound platform for discussing the long-term implications of the radionuclides in the environment.

However the radiological consequences are only one part of the necessary work. There is a need to regularly monitor the broad environmental impact of the accident and the response to it over the longer term, in terms of land use change, impacts on livelihoods, and the socio-economic costs. UNEP has developed and used methodologies for assessing such impacts in the context of other disasters and conflicts, and these could be used to good advantage here.

- and improvements in monitoring and assessment capabilities.

Improvements in response can only be achieved by commitments to increased preparedness, including training and exercising.

The Fukushima accident thankfully did not lead to any immediate radiation deaths among the population and workers, despite the large death toll and environmental impact of the earthquakes and tsunami themselves. However while recovery from the earthquakes and tsunami is still a key priority presently, the effects of long-lived radioactive material in the environment will likely be a potential issue of concern for many years to come.

These are important challenges for the global community to which we must respond in a coordinated and inclusive manner, through partnerships with all the key stakeholders.

Thank you.

Check against delivery
Matthew Gubb on behalf of UNEP

16 December 2012