

Director General's Remarks

Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Nuclear Safety

Friday, 26 April 2002

Mr. President, let me start by saying how pleased I am to have the opportunity to be with you today at your last session and witness the adoption of your report by consensus. I would have liked to have been able to spend more time with you but unfortunately I was prevented from doing so by conflicting commitments. However, I have been following your work closely over the last two weeks and I want to congratulate you on a job very well done. The level of participation at this meeting has been three times as high as at the first meeting; we have seen better focused national reports and better responses to questions, frequently detailed in writing; and there has been greater concentration on issues of concern.

As you know, I regard the Convention as part of the overall nuclear safety regime. That regime has many components, but they all have one single objective — to make sure that safety is at as high a level as possible. You form an important part of that overall regime and should always keep in mind that your work reinforces the other components, and vice versa. As has often been said, nuclear safety is as strong as its weakest link, and I hope that soon all States, particularly those who are operating nuclear power plants, will be parties to the Convention. Universality is a key aim we should all continue to work for.

I would like to stress the fact that the Convention is a living process. We need always to make sure that it continues to be relevant. As lawyers would say, this kind of agreement has to be interpreted teleologically — interpreted in a way which gives effect to its overall objective, which is to improve and enhance safety. But it is a convention which commits the parties to a process rather than to a clearly defined technical objective. The French terminology makes the difference clear: the Convention involves an “obligation de moyens” rather than an “obligation de résultat”. And for this reason the peer review process is of vital importance because it is a means by which you can check whether everyone is in full conformity with the letter and the spirit of the process — a process which should eventually lead to increasingly greater safety.

The peer review this time has become more comprehensive, open and transparent. And in that context, I am very pleased to see that you are also aware that safety, in addition to being primarily a national responsibility, is also highly dependent in many aspects on international co-operation; this meeting is itself a clear illustration of that fact.

But I am also pleased to see that, in addition to the national reports, you have asked the Agency to provide — on the basis of the large number of missions we conduct every year — an overall perspective on how we see the evolving trends, what we see as the areas of weaknesses and the areas that need to be improved. This is obviously a task which we will be happy to perform since we do the same with almost all other conventions concluded under the auspices of the Agency. It will add an objective assessment, a second opinion, and further transparency.

You have focused on a number of issues that are also priorities for the Agency; one such issue is safety culture. As we have learned in other areas, it is not enough simply to have a structure, it is not enough to say that we have the necessary laws and the appropriate regulatory bodies. And I do not want to underemphasize the importance of regulatory bodies and regulatory infrastructures — the resources, the training, the laws, the independence. All these are important, but equally important is that we have in place a safety culture that gives effect to the structure that we have developed. To me, effectiveness and transparency are key. So it is an issue which I am pleased to see you are giving the attention it deserves and we will continue to work with you in clarifying, developing and applying safety culture through our programmes and through our technical co-operation activities.

A second issue which you highlighted is management of nuclear knowledge. There is, as we all know, a lack of interest in nuclear matters on the part of young people and we need to continue to work to ensure that there is continuity of knowledge. We have a meeting here from 17 to 19 June to look into that issue, to ensure that we have continuity of knowledge and particularly of the safety aspects, and to maintain safety cases, the institutional memory, and the knowledge we have gained over time.

Other high priority issues which you have identified include: planned life extension; the need during life extension to look into the ageing of equipment and structures; deregulation and its impact on safety; and the question of periodic safety reviews. We share your concerns

on these subjects, and we will make sure that they are reflected in our programme for the next biennium. We will work closely with you and with INSAG — our high level advisory group on safety — and I am sure that all these priorities will continue to be translated into Agency programme priorities.

The question of co-operation between regulatory bodies is one that I have given emphasis to over the last few years. It is very important that there be exchange of experience and exchange of expertise between regulatory bodies, and between the manufacturers of power reactors and the countries where the reactors are operated. Also of importance in terms of international co-operation is the development of adequate emergency response everywhere.

A major point that I want to leave with you is that although safety is a national responsibility — there is absolutely no question about that — many issues need international co-operation. No matter how good the safety is in your own country, it will not help if your neighbour does not have the same standard because — and I know that it has almost become a cliché — an accident anywhere is an accident everywhere. That is something we all have to keep in mind.

I am pleased to see that many countries which do not have operating nuclear power plants are participating in this meeting of the Parties to the Convention, and are participating actively. That is important because it gives them an insight into how seriously the nuclear power countries are taking safety issues and because if they have questions this is an appropriate forum to ask them.

Let me conclude by expressing my gratitude to the Chairman, Miroslav Gregorič, for his excellent leadership, and to all of you for the very constructive spirit in which you have worked together to develop what we hope is becoming an effective global safety regime based on legal norms. One outcome of the Convention is greater harmonization of safety practices achieved through interactions between yourselves and between you and the IAEA. All this is a vibrant process, and it is one that I am pleased to see and very proud to be part of.

I wish you a successful continuation of your important task and a safe trip home.