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Fukushima accident a ‘wake-up call’ to boost nuclear safety, UN forum told



IAEA fact-finding team examines devastation at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in May 2011

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The accident at Japan’s Fukushima nuclear power plant earlier this year highlights the need to strengthen nuclear safety and security, top United Nations officials said today at a meeting convened to rally political support and advance concrete action.

[Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon, who convened the high-level meeting on nuclear safety and security, [said](#) that Fukushima – along with the Chernobyl disaster 25 years ago – serve as a “wake-up call” for the world’s people.

“The effects of nuclear accidents respect no borders. To adequately safeguard our people, we must have strong international consensus and action. We must have strong international safety standards,” Mr. Ban told the meeting, which is being held on the margins of the annual general debate of the General Assembly.

He noted that in the months following the Fukushima accident, which occurred in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that struck the country in March, the international community has mobilized to assess and apply lessons learned.

National authorities have undertaken voluntary reviews of natural hazards facing their nuclear installations; governments have reviewed safety standards and regulations; and the international community has discussed the issue at numerous forums and has taken concrete steps.

“The message has been clear and unified: we cannot accept business as usual – and we all have a stake in getting it right,” Mr. Ban said.

“The United Nations has a clear role to play,” added the Secretary-General, who launched a UN system-wide study on the implications of the accident.

The report touches on a variety of areas, including environment, health, food security, sustainable development and the nexus between nuclear safety and nuclear security, and presents system-wide views on how to improve disaster risk preparedness.

“Clearly, there is a compelling need for greater transparency and open accountability. We must rebuild public trust,” said Mr. Ban. “We also need greater cooperation between international organizations and between governments.”

Strengthening nuclear safety also means strengthening the capacity of the relevant international organizations – particularly the UN International Atomic Energy Agency ([IAEA](#)), given its central role in nuclear safety and security, he noted.

It is also necessary to strengthen the link between the international nuclear response system and the international humanitarian coordination system. In addition, it is vital to focus on the nexus between safety and security, to ensure that any deliberate attack against nuclear facilities or nuclear materials does not have catastrophic consequences, said the Secretary-General.

The President of the General Assembly said that Fukushima was a “stark reminder” that ensuring nuclear safety requires the maintenance of the highest nuclear safety and security standards, as well as long-term disaster preparedness and strong international cooperation.

“When one of the world’s best-prepared countries can experience such a large-scale nuclear accident, it is all too clear that we must continue to evolve our thinking and practices for the safe and secure operation of nuclear facilities worldwide,” said Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser.

He noted that safe and efficient use of nuclear energy can advance the well-being of States and their peoples and help to achieve key Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) – the targets to slash poverty, hunger, preventable illness and a host of other socio-economic ills, all by 2015.

“Serious examination of safe and efficient use of nuclear energy must thus consider closely related issues, including advancing nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation goals, the prevention of nuclear terrorism and others,” he stated.

Addressing the meeting by video, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano noted that public confidence in the safety of nuclear power has been “deeply shaken” throughout the world following the Fukushima accident.

“I believe confidence can be restored in time, but only if governments, regulators and plant operators – and the IAEA – work together effectively to strengthen nuclear safety everywhere and demonstrate a high degree of transparency,” he told the gathering.

The IAEA Board of Governors last week adopted a 12-point action plan on nuclear safety, a key element of which is an agreement by all Member States with nuclear power programmes to promptly undertake a national assessment of the design of nuclear power plants, focused on the lessons learned from Fukushima, and to take corrective action where necessary.

“Fukushima Daiichi was a terrible accident, but it will not mean the end of nuclear power,” Mr. Amano added, noting that the latest IAEA projections show that global use of nuclear power will continue to grow “quite significantly” in the coming decades, although at a slower pace than in previous projections.

Among the heads of State addressing the meeting was Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, who said that while a full-scale process to discover the cause of the Fukushima accident will continue for some time, the country has identified ‘faults’ and ‘lessons learned.’

“Full-fledged inspections to be conducted based upon these on the safety of nuclear power stations both within Japan and abroad should be a most urgent task ahead of us,” he said.

Providing a brief [summary](#) at the close of the meeting, Mr. Ban highlighted the need to ensure public confidence and trust; support at the highest level all existing efforts to strengthen nuclear safety; strengthen the international framework; and build a stronger connection between nuclear safety and nuclear security. States should also promptly review and strengthen their emergency preparedness and response arrangements and capabilities, he added.

In a [press statement](#) issued after the meeting, the Secretary-General cited the need to address the nexus between nuclear safety and nuclear security. In this connection, he encouraged the relevant forums to take up these matters, including the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit and the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

He also called for steps to ensure the universal application of the international conventions on nuclear safety and security.

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