HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON NUCLEAR SAFETY AND SECURITY

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Yukiya Amano

Director General

INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY
Secretary-General, Distinguished Heads of State and Government, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this High-Level Meeting on Nuclear Safety and Security. I am grateful to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for convening this gathering and bringing UN-system organizations together to collaborate on nuclear safety and security. This is an issue of vital importance to all countries, whether they have nuclear power plants or not. I am sorry that it has not been possible for me to attend the High-Level Meeting in person. As you may know, the IAEA General Conference, the annual meeting of our highest policy-making organ, takes place all this week in Vienna. It has important issues on its agenda, including endorsing the IAEA Action Plan on Nuclear Safety, which was approved by consensus by our Board of Governors last week. I will have more to say about this in a moment.

Six months have passed since a very serious accident occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan following an earthquake and tsunami of unprecedented severity. Much has been achieved in that time to regain full control of the situation. The Agency's assessment now is that the reactors are essentially stable and the expectation is that the "cold shutdown" of all the reactors will be achieved as planned.

Public confidence in the safety of nuclear power has been deeply shaken throughout the world. This is entirely understandable. Public anxiety must be taken very seriously. 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. I hope your meeting will make a solid contribution to this important process.

I saw for myself just how powerful and destructive nature can be when I visited the Fukushima Daiichi plant in July. It was a shocking and sobering experience. But I was also deeply impressed by the courage and dedication of the engineers and workers at the site. Efforts by the Japanese authorities and the plant operator have led to a steady improvement in the situation in the last six months. The IAEA will continue to provide every possible assistance to Japan as it restores full control over the Fukushima Daiichi plant and tackles the challenging work of decontamination and remediation throughout the affected areas. Continuing full transparency on Japan's part will also be important.

The IAEA has spared no effort since the accident happened on March 11 to assist the operator and the Japanese authorities. We have cooperated effectively with many other international organizations, including the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Meteorological Organization. I visited Japan a few days after the accident to offer IAEA assistance to then-Prime Minister Kan and to urge the greatest transparency. I also dispatched a number of expert teams to provide advice and assistance in areas such as radiation monitoring and food safety. An IAEA International Fact-Finding Expert Mission undertook a 10-day mission to Japan ahead of the IAEA Ministerial Conference which I convened in Vienna in June.

At that conference, a Ministerial Declaration was adopted which provides a solid basis for a significant strengthening of nuclear safety, emergency preparedness and radiation protection of people and the environment throughout the world. To translate the Declaration
into action quickly, the IAEA Board of Governors, as I mentioned, last week approved a 12-point Action Plan on Nuclear Safety.

Key elements of the Action Plan include an agreement by all Member States with nuclear power programmes to promptly undertake a national assessment of the design of nuclear power plants against site specific extreme natural hazards, focused on lessons learned so far from the Fukushima Daiichi accident, and to take corrective action where necessary.

One other important element of the Action Plan is strengthening the framework for IAEA peer reviews. These involve assembling international expert missions to assess the safety of a country’s nuclear reactors, its emergency preparedness and response capabilities and the effectiveness of its nuclear regulatory system. All countries have much to learn from this process, which I believe will significantly improve nuclear safety throughout the world, increase transparency and help to restore public confidence.

Under the Action Plan, the effectiveness of national and international emergency preparedness and response arrangements, IAEA safety standards and relevant international conventions will also be reviewed and action will be taken to improve transparency and dissemination of information. New lessons will continue to be learned and the Action Plan will be updated accordingly.

Secretary-General,

Fukushima Daiichi was a terrible accident, but it will not mean the end of nuclear power. In fact, 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 our previous projections. The growth will reflect unchanged factors such as increasing demand for energy, as well as concerns about climate change, dwindling reserves of oil and gas and uncertainty of supply of fossil fuels. A few countries have decided to scale back, or even terminate, their nuclear power programmes, but many others are proceeding with ambitious expansion plans. The resolve of many developing countries to introduce nuclear power to meet their increasing energy needs remains undiminished. Each country’s situation is different and each country’s sovereign right to choose the most appropriate energy mix for itself must be respected.

The IAEA will remain a steadfast partner for all Member States. Nuclear safety is the responsibility of individual countries, but the IAEA – the only international organization with expertise in all aspects of nuclear energy – will play the leading role in shaping a safer nuclear future throughout the world. For those countries which have, or are planning, nuclear power programmes, the IAEA will help to ensure that nuclear reactors are operated to the highest standards of safety and efficiency. All such countries must ensure that the best possible safety infrastructure and robust independent regulatory frameworks are in place.

I appeal to governments, nuclear regulators and plant operators not to return to “business as usual” once the crisis at Fukushima Daiichi has faded from the international headlines. We must retain our sense of urgency. The measures agreed in the IAEA Action Plan must be implemented fully and quickly. We should be able to demonstrate measurable progress in as many areas as possible by the summer of 2012. The Agency will set to work immediately to fulfil its responsibilities under the Action Plan. Progress will be reported to our Board of Governors, General Conference and bodies such as the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Nuclear Safety. We will continue to send technical teams to Japan, as required.
Support from Heads of State and Government for the work of the IAEA will be essential in the coming years. We continue to do everything we can to prioritize and increase efficiency within our limited resources, but additional budget support for the Agency's nuclear safety activities will be necessary.

Secretary-General,

All of us have an obligation to the people of the world to make all nuclear power plants as safe as humanly possible, as quickly as possible.

Thank you.