Statement by UK Foreign Secretary, The Rt Hon William Hague MP, at the UN High Level Meeting on Nuclear Safety and Security

22 September 2011

Thank you Mr General-Secretary,

I would like to start by expressing solidarity with Japan following the unprecedented earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011. The sheer scale of the devastation, and the courage and skill shown by those who are dealing with the aftermath of that day, will not be forgotten.

Today’s event is an important part of the international response to that exceptional disaster and subsequent nuclear accident at Fukushima. Nuclear accidents do not respect international borders. It is not just experts who understand the potential for trans-boundary effects of nuclear accidents: the public have a clear understanding too. This has led to an increase in public concern about the safety of global civil nuclear power.

If nuclear energy is to have a future, and my Government has publicly stated that it does, we must work together to ensure we address these concerns, and that we do so transparently. We will need to demonstrate that; we put the highest possible priority on ensuring the safety of nuclear energy; that our nuclear facilities are physically secure; and that we are prepared for emergencies.

To ensure nuclear safety, action is necessary at both the national and international level to ensure that the lessons of Fukushima are fully understood and applied. We need to make continuous improvement to our safety regimes and ensure that the international safety framework is both robust and appropriate.

We have already made a strong start, with the International Atomic Energy Agency’s fact-finding mission to Japan, led by the UK’s Dr Mike Weightman; the IAEA’s excellent work at the June Ministerial; and the follow-up work at the IAEA General Conference, taking place this week.

If we are to achieve continuous improvement in global nuclear safety, it is vital that all countries operate not only within the letter, but also the spirit, of international conventions, such as the Convention on Nuclear Safety.

One way of demonstrating this is being open to peer-review. In the EU, each Member State is undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the safety of its nuclear power plants in a series of stress tests. The UK welcomes this initiative, and commends those countries that are undertaking similar tests.

Our focus is rightly on prevention, but we also must be ready to handle emergencies. In the UK, we are reviewing our emergency plans and developing a new national strategy benchmarked against the highest international standards. Many other countries are now undertaking similar reviews and urge those yet to do so to make it a priority.
Action on nuclear security is also vital. We must ensure that we are prepared for man-made events, such as terrorism, and should not shy away from strengthening our national arrangements. While there are links between nuclear safety and nuclear security, we need different approaches: for example, it would be unwise to share detailed security information in the same way as we do safety-related data.

Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of governments together to understand, and take seriously, the threat. I encourage countries, where appropriate to do so, to engage with international nuclear security initiatives and Conventions. In particular, I urge signatories that have yet to ratify the IAEA’s amended Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and the UN International Convention on the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, to do so.

The renewal of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 sent a clear message that the security of materials; the prevention of trafficking; and action to reduce the proliferation risk remains of vital importance.

To sum up, if I have one message it is to stress that preventable accidents must not be allowed to occur. And that we need to work together to ensure the necessary level of safety, security and emergency preparedness that will allow us to continue to benefit from civil nuclear power. And in doing that the IAEA has a central role to play.

Thank you.