In response to the Fukushima Dai-ichi disaster, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for a high-level meeting (HLM) on nuclear safety and security, which he envisioned as a global debate on the future of nuclear energy, including “a new cost-benefit analysis of nuclear energy”. The meeting convened on 22 September, however, fell very far short of such a debate.

The majority of delegations that took the floor during the HLM reiterated the importance of nuclear power for meeting their countries’ energy needs, while the countries that have rejected nuclear power because of its dangers to human health and the environment were too reserved about criticizing the continued use of nuclear power as a form of energy or about countering claims that it can ever be safe, clean, or economical.

**Highlights**

- Most participating delegations concluded that nuclear power remains a viable option for meeting their energy needs, though several others (including Austria, Germany, Greece, and Ireland) have rejected nuclear power and are looking to renewable energy and energy efficiency as the key to a safe and sustainable future.
- Most delegations highlighted the international nature of nuclear disasters and the effects on the environment and human health, though many still reiterated that the decision to develop nuclear energy is a sovereign one.
- The vast majority of participating delegations supported strengthening global nuclear safety measures and mechanisms; strengthening the role of the IAEA in nuclear safety; and developing further international coordination in disaster preparedness and response.
- Several states indicated they would be willing to submit to “peer review” inspections of their nuclear facilities.
- Most states recognized that public confidence in nuclear power has been shaken by Fukushima and acknowledged the need to improve transparency in all aspects of nuclear power. However, several delegations seemed to think that the main goal is to “reassure” the public that nuclear power is safe and clean rather than actually listening to their population’s demands for cessation of use or development of nuclear power.
- Norway’s delegation argued that nuclear safety cannot be dealt with in isolation from nuclear security, non-proliferation, and disarmament and that nuclear safety efforts will be complementary to efforts to promote a world free of nuclear weapons.
Brazil railed against nuclear weapons as a source of global insecurity and P5 privilege. The Marshall Islands called for remediation of the affects of nuclear weapons testing to which its population was subjected. The Secretary-General made several suggestions for action, including:

- forwarding his final summary to the General Assembly plenary, the Fourth Committee, the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit, and the 2012 NPT preparatory committee;
- having the General Assembly ensure that the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation has all the necessary capacity and resources to accomplish its task;
- encouraging the 2012 NPT preparatory committee to consider allocating specific time to discuss nuclear safety and security;
- urging all states to become party to and to implement all relevant international nuclear safety and security instruments;
- recommending that the preparatory process for Rio+20 consider addressing nuclear safety and security issues;
- asking the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to study ways to enhance capacity of its members in order to strengthen the link between the international nuclear response system and the international humanitarian coordination system; and
- encouraging the G8 to further develop its nuclear safety and security initiatives, taking into account the issues raised by the Fukushima disaster.

**Cost-benefit “debate”**

Many states did highlight the grave dangers of nuclear power. Spain’s Secretary of State for Energy said, “A nuclear accident involving an external release of radioactive material is unacceptable in our society.” Nepal’s Deputy Prime Minister described how nuclear power can be a “weapon” that takes lives of people and affects the entire ecosystem. Qatar’s delegation emphasized that the radiation released in a nuclear accident “may have serious environmental and health consequences not only on the country where this disaster occurred, but also on neighboring countries, the generation that experienced the disaster, as well [as] the generations to come.”

Lithuania’s delegation argued that because “nuclear accidents respect no borders, the development of any nuclear energy project in any state must be implemented with due responsibility for the population of their own and other states.” Azerbaijan’s representative likewise noted that environmental impact assessments must be shared by states with nuclear power installations with their neighbours and that the common objective of the international community “should be to deepen our understanding of the entire range of issues relating to the development of nuclear energy and its safety, transcending national borders.”

Yet most concluded that despite these risks, the use and development of nuclear power would (and many argued, should) continue. French President Sarkozy, speaking during the opening plenary, rejected from the outset the Secretary-General’s intended “cost-benefit analysis,” stating that the “right debate” must be organized. From the French government’s perspective, the “right debate” is not about whether or not nuclear power should be used—claiming that with the
unprecedented energy needs of the world, we cannot do without nuclear energy, “which is the only energy that will allow us to fulfill our commitments in terms of greenhouse gas reductions”. Rather, the “real question,” he said, is how can we ensure nuclear power is safe?

“Improving nuclear safety”

President Sarkozy and countless other delegates insisted that the existing conventions on nuclear safety, combined with the IAEA action plan on nuclear safety, endorsed on 22 September by the IAEA General Conference, are the best tool for enhancing global nuclear safety. The most frequently highlighted provisions from the action plan included strengthening peer reviews of nuclear power facilities; strengthening emergency preparedness and response to nuclear disasters; strengthening the effectiveness of national regulatory bodies; strengthening IAEA nuclear safety standards; improving the effectiveness of the international legal framework on nuclear safety; and enhancing transparency and effectiveness of communication and dissemination of information to the general public.

Switzerland’s Ambassador Kessler criticized this action plan, arguing that it “maintains the status quo, especially in vital areas of ‘peer reviews’. It therefore provides no real added value compared to the current practice.” He emphasized, “This is particularly regrettable because a strengthened ‘peer review’ could have made it possible to detect safety-related weaknesses in the Fukushima facility.” Furthermore, he argued, the action plan “does not properly reflect the reality of risks incurred” from “the entire nuclear field”.

Austria’s Foreign Minister emphasized the importance of creating a global nuclear liability regime that addresses the concerns of all states that might be affected by a nuclear accident with a view to providing appropriate compensation for nuclear damage. Many governments noted the importance of separating nuclear regulatory and promotional bodies. Japan indicated it would take this step by April 2012.

Nuclear weapons

Just as with the UN system-wide study on nuclear power, the inextricable link between nuclear power and nuclear weapons was overwhelmingly ignored (see the assessment of the UN study by Reaching Critical Will). However, the Non-Aligned Movement, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Marshall Islands, Norway, and Qatar did highlight the importance of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation in the context of nuclear safety and security.

Norway’s delegation argued that nuclear safety cannot be dealt with in isolation from nuclear security, non-proliferation, and disarmament and that nuclear safety efforts will be complementary to efforts to promote a world free of nuclear weapons.

Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff emphasized that a world where nuclear weapons are accepted will always be insecure. She described their continued existence as part the “residual, asymmetrical world vision” of the post-war era and called for reform of the UN Security Council, which has been the bastion of logic of nuclear privilege for 65 years and has legitimized the accumulation of fissile materials by nuclear weapon states.
The Non-Aligned Movement pointed out the danger of attacks on nuclear installations and called for the development of a multilateral instrument to ban attacks or threats of attack on nuclear facilities.

The delegation of the Marshall Islands, stating that “no one should have to experience the effects of atomic radiation,” said that the debate on nuclear safety is six decades overdue. Noting that the UN authorized nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, guaranteeing the safety, security, and well-being of the Marshallese people, the delegation reported that the result has been death, cancer, and exile from their homeland. The delegation called on the international community to help “heal this past” and “craft the future”.

“Reassuring public opinion” and the future of nuclear energy

Many governments, along with IAEA Director General Yukio Amano, spoke of the “understandably” negative reaction of public “perception” of nuclear power and suggested that if the HLM sent a strong signal “in support of nuclear power” as “clean and safe,” it would go a long way to improving the public’s attitude toward nuclear energy. The Indian delegation’s entire speech was oriented toward changing public perceptions of nuclear power. Without referencing the many ongoing popular protests against the construction of nuclear power plants around its country, the Indian delegation expressed concern with “reassuring public opinion” than with addressing its concerns, stating that nuclear energy is “an essential element of India’s national energy basket.”

The United States was equally firm that nuclear power is “not an option that we simply can take off the table,” while the Russian Federation insisted that the Fukushima disaster “should not impede the development of nuclear power” and that, “with a responsible attitude,” nuclear energy can provide “a reliable, efficient and environmentally clean source of energy while guaranteeing safety for people and the environment.” Pakistan’s foreign minister declared that nuclear energy “is essential to advance [its] development agenda,” while Nigeria’s delegation gave its support for nuclear energy “as a clean and viable source of power.”

Japan’s new Prime Minister, Yoshihiko Noda, gave no indication that he would follow the popular will of his people to phase-out nuclear energy. Instead, Prime Minister Noda said he is determined to raise nuclear safety standards in Japan to the highest level in the world and that his country will assist others interested in developing nuclear power.

Prime Minister Noda did promise that his country would redouble its efforts to create and use renewable energy. Very few other countries discussed the benefits of renewable energy, though Austria, Greece, and Ireland, which do not use nuclear power, along with Germany, which will completely phase-out its use of nuclear power by 2022, espoused the benefits of renewable energy and energy efficiency as key to a sustainable future for all.

That said, most of the government interventions at the HLM indicated the widespread belief that improving safety standards and mechanisms and disaster preparedness will result in “safe” nuclear power. However, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, and Fukushima have definitively proven
that nuclear power can never be safe. As M.V. Ramana says in the NGO report *Costs, risks, and myths of nuclear power*, “Catastrophic accidents are inevitable with nuclear power. While these may not be frequent in an absolute sense, there are good reasons to believe that they will be far more frequent than quantitative tools such as probabilistic risk assessments predict.” Faith in newer technologies or more stringent safety mechanisms is unjustified in this context. In a brief report on the HLM, Robert Zuber of Global Action to Prevent War writes,

Early notification of accidents is important but not sufficient. Improving international safety and security standards related to construction, maintenance and rapid response to accidents is likewise essential, but does not in and of itself represent full, “good faith” compliance with our responsibility to protect civilians within and beyond borders from radiation and other impacts from nuclear catastrophe. The “global nuclear safety culture” envisioned by the Germans must start, first and foremost, with honest risk assessments of nuclear leakage as well as honest discussions of the health and safety repercussions in cases where our assessments prove faulty. Citizens worldwide demanding inexhaustible supplies of accessible, affordable energy must begin to make judgments on that energy similar to those they make every day in their families—the points at which risk mitigates desire.

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