

United Nations Scientific Committee on Atomic Radiation

THE first session of the United Nations Scientific Committee on Atomic Radiation was held in New York between March 14 and 23. The Committee, which was established in December 1955, by a unanimous resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, consists of 15 scientists representing the Governments of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, France, India, Japan, Mexico, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States and the Soviet Union. The Canadian representative to the Committee's first session was Dr. E. A. Watkinson, Chief, Occupational Health Division, Department of National Health and Welfare. Dr. R. Appleyard of Atomic Energy of Canada Limited, acted as consultant.

Problems Examined

During its first session the Committee surveyed the scientific problems involved in carrying out the mandate of the General Assembly for it to examine "The Effects of Radiation on Man and His Environment". In accordance with the Assembly's directive to receive and assemble radiological information, the Committee requested the Secretariat to collect, by August 1, 1956, from Member States of the United Nations and of the Specialized Agencies, preliminary measurements of natural radiation and of environmental contamination caused by man-made radioactivity; it also requested Governments to assemble information in other scientific fields for evaluation by the Committee at its next meeting. The Committee, in addition, considered statements by representatives of the World Health Organization, the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization on ways in which these Specialized Agencies might co-operate with the Committee in its work. Working Groups of the Committee discussed the following topics: genetics, the effects of irradiation by internally absorbed isotopes, the effects of external radiation, natural radiation background, exposures during medical procedures, occupational exposure, and environmental contamination.

The importance of the task confronting the Committee was emphasized by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold at its opening meeting. He was convinced that the introduction of concrete scientific material would help to move the subject of atomic radiation out of the area of emotional sensationalism and place it squarely on the solid footing of scientific knowledge, which will, in turn, change unconsidered fear into sober precaution. The Secretary-General pointed out that public interest in a new scientific subject is a basically desirable and encouraging feature of modern civilization. "However," he declared, "in this case, as in many others where the scientific basis has not yet been properly worked out, there is a lack of knowledge which has caused in many instances an unwarranted reaction to the whole subject. For this reason", he continued, "it has been found wise to make an international effort to give the widest possible distribution to all available scientific data concerning ionizing radiation and its effects upon man".

The next meeting of the Committee has been scheduled for October 1956.