

# STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES



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## THE THREAT OF ATOMIC RADIATION

Statement by Mr. Paul Tremblay, Canadian Ambassador to Chile and Canadian Representative on the Special Political Committee of the United Nations, on October 16, 1961

... When we took up in this Committee just over a week ago the question of allocating priorities to the various items on our agenda, I stressed the urgency of giving consideration to the problem of radiation hazards to human health. At that time several other delegations indicated similar concern that the item on the effects of radiation should be taken up urgently, and it was placed first on our agenda. My delegation now has been joined by 22 others in putting forward a resolution on this subject. The number of delegations which are co-sponsoring this resolution, and the broad geographic distribution reflected in the list of co-sponsors, testify to the depth and extent of international concern about the growing menace of radioactive fall-out. This is also underlined by the many expressions of support for the objectives of our resolution which have come from delegations other than the co-sponsors.

This afternoon I propose to outline somewhat more fully the basis for this widespread apprehension. I should also like to explain the general nature and objectives of our resolution, which reflects the approach to this problem shared by Canada with so many other countries in all parts of the world.

### Canada's Concern Over Radiation Peril

The concern of the Canadian Government about the hazards of radiation is not a recent development. We have been actively represented on the United Nations Scientific Committee, whose annual progress report is now before us, since that Committee was established in 1955. At the fourteenth session of the General Assembly, Canada played a leading part in developing the resolution which detailed the current terms of reference of the Scientific Committee, and sought to intensify the efforts being made to advance man's knowledge about the effects of

radiation. At the same time, having developed in Canada an extensive system of facilities for analyzing radioactive samples, we offered to share these facilities with other countries not as adequately equipped to carry out these studies. It is gratifying that, since then, 13 other member states of the United Nations and two of the Specialized Agencies have similarly offered to make their laboratories available for analysis of radioactive samples. Several countries already have taken advantage of these facilities for analysis, or are arranging to do so.

I have mentioned these developments ... to emphasize the long-standing and continuing concern of the Canadian Government about the harmful effects of radiation. Our apprehensions of course have been greatly intensified by the recent resumption of nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere. The Secretary of State for External Affairs of Canada, in his statement on October 3 to the General Assembly, stressed what this disturbing development has meant for Canadians. Following the resumption of tests in the atmosphere, the level of radioactive fall-out over one of our major cities - the city of Toronto - multiplied by about one thousand times. There were at the same time sharp increases in fall-out readings at several other points in Canada.

#### Latest Fall-out Figures

I would like to place before the Committee today just a few figures to illustrate how sharply fall-out levels have jumped. In the week ending September 10, the highest fall-out level recorded anywhere in Canada was 20 disintegrations per minute per cubic metre of air. During the following week, however, there were readings of 90 units at Ottawa, 100 units at Montreal, 260 units at Windsor and 470 units at Toronto.

Even higher levels were reached during the week of September 18 to September 24. The average reading for that week at Fort William was about 280 units, and this included peak daily readings of 1,000 units and 600 units. Montreal, the largest centre of population in Canada, had an average reading of 207 units for the week - that included three consecutive daily readings of more than 350 units. Ottawa also had very high fall-out readings during the same period; the average for the week was 246 units, and two consecutive daily readings were above 500 units. At Windsor a reading of 570 units was recorded on September 22, and the average for the week there was 185 units.

I am sure the Committee will agree with me that this is most disturbing information. Nor are we certain what further increases in radiation levels may be expected as a result of the tests which have been carried out, for past experience has shown that a large portion of the radioactive fall-out is likely to be delayed. Moreover, several further atmospheric tests have been

carried out since the fall-out levels which I have quoted were recorded. Every possible effort must be exerted to ensure that there is no further intensification of the already sharply increased levels of radioactive fall-out.

It is true that Canada is one of the countries geographically located in the latitudes which, on the basis of evidence so far available, seem to have received some of the heaviest concentrations of radioactive fall-out. I am sure, however, that the anxiety aroused in Canada by the effects of recent test explosions is shared by peoples of every nation represented in this Committee. There are too many grim uncertainties about this matter of radiation hazards to human welfare for any of us to be complacent. Intensity of radioactive fall-out varies from one locality to another, and from one week to the next. Concentrations build up in particular areas. The long-term effects of exposure are by no means clearly established; some of these effects may not appear for many years. It is thus not only ourselves and our children who face the consequences of ever higher levels of radiation; generations yet unborn also may suffer, to an extent which it is not now possible to measure. Another ominous aspect of the increase in levels of radioactive fall-out is the evidence that some individuals are more susceptible than others to harmful consequences of radiation.

Whatever disagreement or doubt there may be about the level of radiation which would pose an immediate menace to human well-being, the fact that all radiation does present a potential hazard, and that higher levels increase this hazard, is beyond dispute. Everything we learn about the nature and extent of the consequences of radiation re-affirms the gravity of the problem. The fact that we have still so much to learn about its long-term effects cannot fail to add to our apprehension.

#### Canada Protests

It is with these sombre considerations in mind ... that my delegation has participated in formulating the expressions of international concern which are found in the resolution we have put before this Committee. As the Secretary of State for External Affairs of Canada, Mr. Green, said when he addressed the General Assembly, we take the most vigorous exception to having our own and succeeding generations exposed, through the actions of other states, to the dangers of radioactive fall-out. We must register in the most unequivocal terms the anxiety felt among members of this world organization, and the populations represented here, about the growing threat to which mankind is being exposed. By any standard for the conduct of international relations, it cannot be accepted that any state by its actions should cause populations of other states, and their descendants, to be exposed to these incalculable risks. We firmly believe it to be a responsibility of this Assembly to make this point sharply and clearly.

It is essential, therefore, that we should not pass lightly over this item concerning the annual progress report of a scientific body established by the General Assembly to study the effects of atomic radiation. In dealing with it, we must take account of current developments which have such direct and important implications for the studies which that body is carrying out. If we failed to do so, we should be ignoring the views of the Scientific Committee itself. As its report states, the Committee recognizes that the resumption of nuclear test explosions increases the urgency for the intensification of relevant scientific studies.

#### Czech Proposal Opposed

It is difficult for my delegation to understand how the distinguished representative of Czechoslovakia could suggest, as the resolution submitted by his delegation does, that despite the present disturbing circumstances we should treat this item concerning radiation hazards in a routine and, indeed, almost casual manner. Item 24 is, after all, the only item on the agenda of the sixteenth session which deals specifically with the consequences of atomic radiation. I am sure the Committee will agree with me that as representative of our peoples - the very men, women and children directly threatened by the radiation menace - we cannot do less in this Assembly than to take the kind of positive and substantive action which they expect of us. We must, therefore, seize the opportunity afforded by the consideration of this item to ensure that the focus of world opinion is held on this grave problem.

Before I pass on to the scientific proposals contained in our resolution, I should perhaps comment briefly on one possible misconception about the nature of its objectives. It is not our intention - and in this I am sure I speak for all co-sponsors - it is in no way our intention to involve ourselves here with the complex question of effective and practical arrangements for achieving a cessation of nuclear-weapons tests. The position of the Canadian Government on this issue is well known. Canada is unalterably opposed to the testing of nuclear weapons, both because of the radiation hazard posed by such tests and because of their contribution to the development of ever more terrible weapons of war. The Canadian attitude in this respect has been emphasized wherever and whenever the matter of tests has been discussed. It will continue to be stressed in the appropriate forum, the First Committee of this Assembly.

#### A Harsh Reality

But what we are concerned with here in the Special Political Committee is one specific aspect of the dangers associated with the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. The basis for our urgent examination of this problem is the indisputable fact that sharp increases in radioactive fall-out have occurred as a result of nuclear-weapons testing. This is not a matter for argument and it is not a theoretical prospect; it is a harsh reality.

The hazards which it poses for all our people are the proper concern of the Scientific Committee whose report we have before us. It is not only appropriate but also imperative that, in the light of recent developments, we should place renewed emphasis on all the various lines of study being carried out by the Committee.

It is against this background that I turn now to the proposals we have offered in the 22-power resolution before the Committee.

The preambular paragraphs of our resolution record the deep and universal concern about the increasing levels of radioactive fall-out, to which I have already referred. The second of these paragraphs stresses particularly the apprehension about the cumulative effects of exposure to ever-increasing levels of radiation over a long period of time.

The fourth paragraph of the resolution sets forth a declaration citing the responsibility of all states in respect of any actions by them which would further increase levels of radioactive fall-out, with possibly harmful biological consequences for the present and future populations of other countries.

Bearing in mind particularly the reference, in Paragraph 12 of the Scientific Committee's report, to the implications of recent developments, the resolution goes on to stress the importance of pursuing and intensifying the various scientific studies on radiation levels and effects. It reaffirms the importance of the fullest international co-operation in exchanging results of research on the radiation problem. The resolution also stresses the importance of making available to the Committee the results of research carried out and information acquired by national services, so that its second comprehensive report may be as scientifically authoritative and informative as possible.

We and our co-sponsors have also considered it important that the preparation of the comprehensive report should be expedited as far as possible, in view of the mounting international concern about the effects of radiation. With the same considerations in mind, the resolution in Paragraph 9 invites the Committee to consider whether the information before it would call for the submission of an interim report before the comprehensive report can be made available. The possibility that the facts compiled by the Committee on levels or effects of radiation might warrant such interim reports was, of course, envisaged by the General Assembly when the Scientific Committee was established. Its original terms of reference specifically provide for such a possibility.

The main work of the Scientific Committee is concerned with assessing the biological implications for mankind of exposure to radiation. With so much concern at the present time about

radioactive fall-out, a major and increasing source of radiation, it is imperative that this aspect of our studies on the radiation problem should be particularly emphasized. Section II of the resolution which we are co-sponsoring, having to do with the role of the World Meteorological Organization, seeks to amplify the information available about the world-wide incidence and distribution of radioactive fall-out.

#### Role of WMO

The World Meteorological Organization is a Specialized Agency of the United Nations, which has 102 members. Its facilities enable it to collect, co-ordinate and distribute accurate information about atmospheric phenomena in all parts of the world. The Meteorological Organization thus is uniquely suited to assist in increasing the extent and accuracy of man's knowledge about concentrations of radioactive fall-out and the pattern of movements of such concentrations. It is also well equipped to summarize and disseminate such information throughout the world, without delay and on a regular basis.

I have already mentioned the very high concentrations of radioactive fall-out which have been recorded recently in various parts of Canada; and other members of this Committee, I am sure, will be reporting similarly high levels elsewhere. But one of the very disturbing aspects of the current trend toward ever-higher average levels of fall-out is the fact that our information is so incomplete. Over large areas of the world, no regular records of fall-out levels are maintained. It may be that the populations living there are being exposed to equal or greater dangers than are suggested by the levels recorded where statistics are kept. Moreover, until we have comprehensive readings of fall-out levels throughout the world for a considerable period of time, there will be much still to be learned about the movements of fall-out systems, and the duration of concentrations in particular areas. This information clearly is of great importance in assessing the nature and extent of radiation hazards.

... The members of the World Meteorological Organization - and this includes most of the countries represented in this Committee - utilize the facilities of the Organization to have at their disposal, on a day-to-day basis, information about a broad range of atmospheric factors throughout the world. What could be more logical than that the United Nations should turn to the competent Specialized Agency to ask that its international system of meteorological reporting should undertake measurement of one of the factors which is of such vital significance to human well-being - the level of atmospheric radioactivity? The collection and distribution of this data, besides contributing to various aspects of the study of radiation hazards, would also serve to keep world public opinion alert to one of the most critical problems of our time.

Summing-up

In conclusion I should like to sum up the fundamental objectives of the resolution which my delegation has joined with many others in placing before this Committee. We wish to register in unmistakable terms the concern of mankind at the growing hazards of radioactive fall-out, which we cannot afford to see further intensified. We seek to direct renewed and increased effort to the pursuit of scientific studies, to improve man's knowledge of the radiation problem and thus make us better able to avert the dangers suggested by the evidence we now possess. Finally, with a view to bringing ever greater pressure of world opinion to bear so that the current disturbing trend may be reversed, it is our purpose to expose this problem to the most intensive public scrutiny - to inscribe on the conscience of the world community an acute awareness of the menace to which our own and succeeding generations are being exposed. We cannot face the future with equanimity if we approach this grave problem complacently, or if we fail to bring to bear the full authority of this organization with a view to dispelling the ominous shadow of radioactive fall-out that menaces all mankind.

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