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PRESS RELEASE

New avenues for improving international nuclear safety

Three Mile Island in 1979, Chernobyl in 1986 and today Fukushima: for the third time, a nuclear power plant has suffered a serious accident, thus imposing a global review of the regulations governing nuclear safety. As for the two first disasters, the international community must learn from Fukushima in order to improve international co-operation, both in terms of crisis management and the prevention of risks.

In this context, and on the request of the President of France, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, Minister for Ecology, Sustainable Development, Transport and Housing organised today in co-operation with the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA), a ministerial seminar on nuclear safety. It brought together 33 countries in order to progress collectively on sharing means and knowledge, on safety audits, on transparency as well as on the mechanisms for technical and human co-operation in crisis situations.

“We cannot continue to think the way we did before Fukushima. What we have learned from this disaster, and what we must remember, is that one accident at a nuclear power plant is enough to create grave and irreversible consequences for man and the environment. It is essential to improve co-operation on nuclear safety in the civil sector, on the international level, as it is not yet at its best possible level. It’s the challenge driving this event,” indicated Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet.

The participants, representing the G8 and OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) member countries, have built upon the conclusions of the G8 meeting in Deauville (which took place on 27 May) to further the debate. At the conclusion of the meeting, they proposed:

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Regarding the prevention of nuclear risks:

- Participating countries largely agreed that all countries with nuclear facilities should carry out safety audits or “stress tests”. The “stress tests”, based directly on the first elements of immediate feedback from the Fukushima accident, will enable an evaluation of their safety and to test their capacity to withstand major incidents.
- The participating countries also recalled the importance of carrying out in each country periodic safety reviews of their facilities, at each stage of operation, examining together the components of the facilities and ensuring their proper functioning.
- It appears necessary to reinforce the global role and missions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and in particular the review mechanisms (of the national safety frameworks, of the nuclear facilities) for which it is responsible.
- It is also necessary to reinforce the safety activities of the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) working towards greater harmonisation of safety practices.
- The French Chair of the seminar requested the IAEA to review its safety standards in light of the Fukushima accident and to ensure their proper application. In particular, as requested by the G8, the IAEA is invited to review its standards on the construction and operation of nuclear power plants in seismic zones and taking account of the overall impact of climate-related events.

Regarding nuclear crisis management:

- The participating countries reflected on how to give greater shape to international solidarity for this type of accident, by developing emergency intervention teams and providing for the sharing of safety and assistance mechanisms. Modifications to the appropriate international conventions (early notification, assistance) should also be proposed.
- Crisis management training should be carried out at the international level in order to bring together a maximum amount of experience. It is also necessary to harmonise procedures for crisis management (for example, by making the distances of the evacuation zones surrounding nuclear power plants or the ceilings above which iodine tablets should be taken, coherent between countries in similar geographic locations), and to facilitate co-operation among crisis management teams.

Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet will present the conclusions of the seminar to nuclear regulatory authorities tomorrow, Wednesday 8 June. This will enable the latter to base their work on the discussions held among policy makers. The conclusions of these two days will also be communicated to the IAEA as part of the preparations for the meeting it will be organising on 20-24 June in Vienna. This international meeting will provide the opportunity to put concrete solutions in place to reinforce nuclear safety on a global scale.

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