

The Tchernobyl Nuclear AccidentSteering Note

1. Whilst the most severe consequences of the Tchernobyl accident, in terms of radioactive fallout, affect the Ukraine and surrounding areas, the accident has had significant consequences for the international community as a result of transboundary problems caused by radioactive fallout. The initial difficulty arose from the lack of early and reliable information from Soviet sources on the extent of the accident and the amount and type of radioactivity released which meant that states in western Europe, particularly those close to the accident region, were unable to judge satisfactorily what counter-measures were appropriate. It was also apparent subsequently that when monitoring results were available, the response of public authorities to the perceived danger to public health differed on a national basis with variations in the assessment of acceptable levels of radiation in air, water and foodstuffs.
2. In the case of the European Community, it was not until 12 May, over two weeks after the accident, that the Community was able to agree a ban on the import of certain foodstuffs from east european countries and to establish control on intra-community trade in certain foodstuffs on the basis of national levels of acceptable radioactivity in food. It is notable that in the case of the latter it proved impossible to agree common limits applicable to all member states. A central problem was that Italy was seeking higher limits of acceptable radioactivity on rich and leafy vegetables than other member States, and in particular, the FRG, were disposed to accept as safe. Ireland had indicated in the



previous week its agreement to the ban on food imports and to limits proposed by the Commission to apply to intra-Community trade. The action taken by the Community concerned limits in iodine - 131, which has a short half life of 8 - 10 days, and these restrictions are to last until the end of May. Discussion has now begun at COREPER level on setting limits on milk and leafy vegetables in respect of caesium 134 and 137, with a half life of 28 - 30 years. Initial discussions indicate that it may be difficult to reach a consensus among member states on common limits to be set.

3. Within the EPC framework, agreement was also reached on 12 May, on an initiative of the UK., to co-ordinate the advice being given by member States to their nationals regarding travel to eastern European countries. The consequences of the Tchernobyl accident has also mobilised the Community into setting up a rapid system of exchange of information on results of radiation monitoring in member States. At present member states are supplying the Commission on a daily basis with radioactivity readings on air, water, and certain foodstuffs.
4. On the international level, the Tchernobyl accident was the subject of an agreed statement issued at the Tokyo Summit. The statement endorsed nuclear power as an energy source whilst underlining the responsibility of nuclear power states in regard to safety of design and operation of plant and, in the case of accidents, for complete and detailed information on such accidents, particularly those with transboundary consequences. The statement went on to criticise the Soviet Union for failing to provide early information. It ended by endorsing the role of



the IAEA in seeking to improve international co-operation in such areas as nuclear safety and the handling of accidents and their consequences. On 5 May 1986, the Director-General of the IAEA, Mr. Hans Blix, at the invitation of the USSR, visited the Tchernobyl plant, along with IAEA officials, to assess the situation. Blix reported to IAEA members on his return.

5. At the request of the FRG, the Board of Governors of the IAEA met in Special Session on 21 May to discuss the Tchernobyl accident. The results of the meeting were issued in the form of the chairman's summary. This statement expressed sympathy to those who had suffered as a result of the accident. It welcomed the readiness of the Soviet Union to provide comprehensive further information on the accident. The statement also recognised that the highest safety standards would be required in order that nuclear energy would continue as an important source of energy.

As regards follow-up action, the Director-General of the IAEA is to present suggestions to the June meeting of the Board of Governors on the following courses of action;

- (a) A meeting of experts, on a wide representative basis, to be convened within three months to review the Tchernobyl accident
- (b) the establishment of representative groups of government experts to draft international agreements on
  - (i) early notification and comprehensive information as nuclear accidents with possible transboundary effects
  - (ii) co-ordinating emergency response and assistance in the event of such accidents



- (c) the establishment of an expert working group to consider co-operation in nuclear safety including means to further refine safety standards.
- (d) The convening, under IAEA auspices, at an early date, of an inter-government conference on the full range of nuclear safety issues.

6. Chancellor Kohl has also proposed an international conference, preceded by a preparatory conference, which would seek to agree methods of early warning and information exchange on nuclear accidents with transboundary effects, improved principles of international co-operation to consider the effects of such accidents, and internationally binding safety standards which would minimise the risk of such accidents and their transboundary effects. The invitation to participate in this conference is addressed primarily to nuclear energy states, but also includes EEC partners. In response to soundings by the FRG Embassy in Dublin, Ireland has indicated it would be interested in being invited to such a conference. General-Secretary Gorbachov, in a television address on 15 May, also proposed intensified international cooperation in the area of nuclear safety and these proposals included one for an international conference under IAEA auspices on co-operation in nuclear safety. The IAEA, Soviet, and FRG proposals on follow-up have a similar objective and it is possible the various proposals will be subsumed into a single follow-up operation, including an international conference, within the IAEA framework.



Irish Position

7. The process of assessing the lessons to be learnt from Tchernobyl is as yet at an early stage. Ireland has taken the view that this accident underlines the need for a greater degree of co-operation at international level to ensure the safety in all its aspects of the operation of nuclear power installations. It reinforces our call for a European inspection force, to be set up under Euratom, to monitor the safety of nuclear installations in the Community. We have therefore supported the proposed follow-up within the IAEA on drawing lessons from the Tchernobyl accident in the form of international agreements on information exchange and assessment of safety standards. In the same vein, we have lent our support to Chancellor Kohl's proposal for an international conference.
  
8. Whilst we appreciate that in the short term, attention will be concentrated on achieving agreement at international level on early warning and information exchange mechanisms and on measures to counter the transboundary effects of nuclear accidents, the lessons drawn from Tchernobyl will in our view be seriously incomplete if they do not lead to agreement at international level or mechanisms to ensure the highest level of safety in all its aspects of the operation of nuclear power installations. In the wake of Tchernobyl, it is clear that public opinion requires reassurance that the highest standards of safety are applied to all nuclear installations. Any follow-up exercise which fails to deliver such reassurance will be politically damaging for all states which are liable to suffer from the transboundary effects of nuclear accidents.



9. It is to be noted that the Twelve were unable to agree on a common statement to the Special Session of the IAEA Board of Governors. France insisted that the statement could go no further than that agreed at the Tokyo Summit. Other partners, including Ireland, wished to see the statement include a reference to the need for reassurance on safety standards. It is to be expected therefore that even in the aftermath of Tchernobyl, our views on the safety issue, and our call for a European Inspection Force, will meet resistance from major nuclear power states who will probably tend to concentrate on short-term issues such as early warning mechanisms and improved information exchange.

*CMG.*  
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