Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Office Minister's statement at the IAEA General Conference

2011-09-19

He said today:

Mr President, Excellencies, distinguished guests,

I would like to congratulate you on your election as the Vice-President of this Conference and to compliment the Secretariat on providing, once again, a first class service to Member States.

I would also like to add the congratulations of the United Kingdom to those states whom we have welcomed at this year’s General Conference as new members of the IAEA.

Impact of Fukushima

Mr President, it is now only six months since the world witnessed the unprecedented scenes created by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan and the developments that followed at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant. Our sympathies continue to extend to the people of Japan recovering from this disaster and our admiration grows at the way they are rebuilding their lives and communities in the face of such adversity. Inevitably, the events at Fukushima have subjected nuclear energy worldwide, and the work of the Agency, to intense scrutiny. In this regard the United Kingdom commends the leadership of the Director General, Mr Amano, and the Secretariat, in securing and publicising accurate and detailed facts from Fukushima, engaging with key figures, coordinating debate and for developing the Action Plan to enhance the international nuclear safety framework. As a result, I believe that the collective commitment to learn from Fukushima means that we all are now in a stronger position than ever to answer the key issues concerning nuclear energy for the future.

Nuclear safety

Of course it was quite right that the spotlight turned immediately towards issues of nuclear safety. Like most states with operational nuclear power plants, we in the United Kingdom quickly sought to examine the implications of Fukushima for our own nuclear facilities. This work, led by the UK’s Chief Nuclear Inspector, Dr Mike Weightman, initially concluded in an interim report that UK facilities were not at the same sorts of risk. But that is not to be complacent. Several actions were identified and are being acted upon and we also await the

final report, with detailed findings in October. We believe it is important that we share such information, and the UK has made such reports available online as soon as they are published.

Dr Weightman was also chosen to lead the work of the IAEA Task Force, to understand, at first hand, the lessons to be learnt from Fukushima and to report back. In that regard the UK warmly commended the initiative of the Director General to hold the Ministerial Conference in June this year. This was an important event and we fully support the aims of the Action Plan as presented to the Board last week, and to this Conference, as a positive and pragmatic step to ensure and continuously improve the standards of nuclear safety. And not least, the United Kingdom urges all Member States, specifically those that are seeking to introduce nuclear activities, to become contracting parties to the relevant conventions: in particular the Nuclear Safety Convention, the Joint Convention on Radioactive Waste Management and Spent Fuel Management, and the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident.

Growth in nuclear energy

But, Mr Chairman, the debate on energy security and climate change is intensifying. This is unavoidable. The global demand for electricity is set to double by 2050. The price of fossil fuels is escalating around the world. So the place of nuclear energy in providing a greater share of low-carbon energy remains vital to many Member States. The United Kingdom, for its part, remains committed to safe nuclear power as part of its overall energy mix both today and in the future. We recognise the need to provide long term certainty about our commitment to ensure investment by the commercial sector. A National Policy Statement for Nuclear Power was published in July this year, which included a list of eight potential sites for new nuclear build. This paves the way for energy companies to come forward with their planning applications for development. We are already seeing significant interest shown by energy companies to invest. At one potential site progress is being made on plans for development: approval has already been granted for work to prepare the site for construction before final approval of a planning application.

While the UK is progressing with its nuclear power programme, we are also anxious to ensure that other States have the information they need: information to make important decisions on whether or not to introduce or expand their own nuclear power programmes. This is, of course, just one of the commitments made by all parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty at the Review Conference - the RevCon - last year, where I had the honour to represent the UK towards the conclusion of that conference, and I think it is timely to consider how those commitments have progressed. Indeed the agreement of an outcome document was, in itself, a major achievement and underlined the world’s commitment to non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Strengthening the Agency

First, the events post-Fukushima, and the associated widespread media interest, have demonstrated to the world at large that the IAEA plays the ultimate central role in ensuring a safe, secure and proliferation-free nuclear future. This year, despite the intense pressures on national budgets, the agreed budget settlement will ensure that the Agency will continue to have the resources and tools to undertake its job effectively and efficiently. Discussions also recognised the varying and increasing demands being placed on the Secretariat and the challenges that lie ahead.

Safeguards

The RevCon also noted the enduring commitment to safeguards, along with security and safety, that will need to accompany the development of nuclear energy. The IAEA safeguards system needs to be effective and efficient to meet the increasing demands being placed upon it. The effectiveness and efficiency of the system depends on the tools available, both legal and technical. We therefore welcome those States that have brought into force the necessary legal tools - Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements and/or Additional Protocols - since the last General Conference. And we continue to urge those Non-Nuclear Weapons States that still have to do so to conclude and bring into force such Agreements and Protocols and, whenever relevant, to amend their Small Quantities Protocol. We also welcome the continuing efforts, both within the Secretariat and Member States, to develop new and improved safeguards tools and techniques. In this regard, we strongly encourage the evolution of safeguards to a system that is fully information driven - one that utilises a State Level Concept to determine the optimal set of safeguards activities to be conducted in any State.

Nuclear Security

On nuclear security, there is no question that the threat posed by those who seek to acquire and use nuclear devices for terrorist and other non-peaceful purposes is real and of growing concern. The United Kingdom welcomes the publication of the three Nuclear Security Recommendations documents earlier in the year and looks forward, in particular, to the one on Radioactive Material being held in the same high regard as ‘INFCIRC/225’ - the Recommendations on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material - now in its fifth agreed version.

The UK also looks forward to the Agency’s continuing implementation of its Nuclear Security Plan, and, as part of its ongoing commitment to nuclear security I am pleased to note that the United Kingdom Government made a contribution of a further £4 million to the Nuclear Security Fund in March this year. These funds will be used to support a range of nuclear security projects world-wide.

MNAs

Let me now turn to the commitment made at last year's RevCon to explore further the development of multilateral approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle. Since then, progress has been significant. The UK strongly supported the resolution in December last year to establish an Agency LEU bank, one that is based on the many pledges of financial support. We believe that this development, alongside the LEU reserve being established in the Russian Federation, will be an important confidence building measure. We also acknowledge the strong effort that is being made by the Secretariat to turn the LEU bank concept into reality and look forward to learning about the full modalities of operation in due course.

The UK was also pleased to bring to the Board its own proposal for a Nuclear Fuel Assurance in March this year. This followed extensive discussions with a number of stakeholders. This virtual assurance mechanism complements the two proposals for physical LEU banks. It is simple, straightforward, and incurs almost no costs, offering the potential to underpin contracts for enrichment services and provide further assurance to those countries seeking to avoid the huge cost and technological challenge involved in establishing their own nuclear fuel cycle. The United Kingdom was grateful for the constructive views put forward both before and during the Board discussions and for the Board's endorsement and looks forward to exploring the implementation of such an NFA with interested States in due course.

In considering any multinational approaches it is important to remind ourselves that no measures - either now or in the future - will affect a state's rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Of course, not all states will find fuel assurance mechanisms useful. The issue is to ensure - in line with the RevCon - that the potential for such mechanisms to assist with the economic and safe expansion of nuclear energy is not overlooked. And that full and open discussion takes place to examine what might be possible, without prejudice or unnecessary pre-conditions on proposals that will inevitably not appeal to all states.

Iran

Let me now focus on Iran. The Director General's latest report reminds us that that Iran continues to defy UN Resolutions and is failing to cooperate fully with the IAEA over its nuclear programme. As well as the ongoing and unanswered concerns from the IAEA the recent Iranian announcements regarding the tripling of production of low enriched uranium to 20% and the move of facilities to the Fordow nuclear site show the programme continues to develop in a direction that offers no assurance of Iran's peaceful intentions. The latest report once again flags the possible military dimensions to the Iranian programme and the increasing concerns of the Agency. The UK fully supports the Director General and his staff in the work they are undertaking in relation to past or current undisclosed activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile.

The Agency's report on Iran once again makes it clear that while Iran is not providing the necessary cooperation the Agency cannot conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in

peaceful activities. The steps that Iran needs to take to restore confidence are clearly set out in IAEA reports and UN Security Council Resolutions. Resolution of this issue remains one of the UK's top priorities and we are committed to working with our E3+3 partners and the EU High Representative to play our part in a negotiated solution - but Iran must show that it is prepared to negotiate seriously, without preconditions.

Syria

Full cooperation by member states with the Agency is essential to supporting the important work that the IAEA undertakes in the area of safeguards. This is why following the Board of Governors resolution on Syria's non compliance with the IAEA over the building of an undeclared nuclear facility; we continue to urge Syria to give the IAEA full disclosure and cooperation that it has promised.

DPRK

Finally Mr President, the UK continues to be deeply concerned by the DPRK's continued lack of co-operation with the IAEA, particularly in light of last year's revelation of the Yongbyon uranium enrichment facility, built without the Agency's knowledge. We call again on the DPRK to resume co-operation with the Agency, comply immediately with all relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, and refrain from any further provocative actions. The UK continues to view the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula as vital for peace and stability in the region and beyond.

Mr President, that concludes my remarks and I wish you and the conference every success.

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