Secretary Clinton at High-Level Meeting on Nuclear Safety

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REMARKS

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
At High-Level Meeting on Nuclear Safety

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SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you very much, Minister, and it’s a privilege to join with so many of you on this very important and timely issue of nuclear safety. I want to thank Secretary General Ban for leading this discussion, and I want to recognize the leadership of Director General Amano. This year the International Atomic Energy Agency has, again, proven itself to be an indispensable forum for monitoring and supporting the peaceful nuclear activity of countries.

A member of our international community suffered a great trauma this year. We all followed it with our hearts and our heads trying to understand the consequences of an immense earthquake that sparked a tsunami that in turn created a nuclear crisis. This trio of disasters devastated the people of Japan, but they also made nuclear safety concerns a headline the world over. The fear of nuclear contamination casts a long shadow. Six months later, Japanese authorities are still working to bring the reactors to a cold shutdown. The towns in the immediate vicinity are still uninhabitable.

So this crisis, if the world needed one, is a very stark reminder that nuclear power requires comprehensive security precautions. Although nuclear safety has been a priority concern in the international community for years, it is clear that we need to redouble our efforts and our thinking as to how to imagine and then put in place reactions to whatever might occur.

The United States faced a core meltdown just 180 miles from here at Three Mile Island. The world recently marked the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. None of us is immune. And on each of these occasions, the IAEA and nuclear regulatory bodies have moved to determine what went wrong and to try to prevent it from happening again. But it’s imperative that every nuclear country be prepared for scenarios that include multiple severe hazards and prioritizes public safety. I think we have to take this opportunity to update our risk and safety assessments in nuclear power plants, to continue improving our international standards for nuclear safety, and strengthen our global emergency preparedness.
In this spirit, President Obama immediately ordered a comprehensive safety review of all 104 active nuclear power plants in the United States. Our Nuclear Regulatory Commission has already completed its near-term inspections and made recommendations for improving our regulatory framework and safety procedures. And as we design and construct next-generation nuclear power plants, we must integrate the lessons that we are still learning from Japan.

Each country must also similarly be responsible for ensuring their own reactors meet the highest, most up-to-date standards of safety. But we must set those standards here. And because a nuclear accident in one country can quickly become a transnational crisis, we are all vested in ensuring each other’s success. That is why the United States supports the action plan on nuclear safety that the IAEA General Conference endorsed earlier today. It outlines steps to strengthen and expand the IAEA’s peer review programs, improve emergency response training, enhance transparency and cooperation, and strengthen nuclear safety infrastructures around the world.

The IAEA safety standards are invaluable to the success of every country’s nuclear energy program. They should be continually reviewed and revised as we learn more and detect new risks. The United States also calls on all nations with nuclear reactors to adhere to the Nuclear Safety Convention, which remains our best instrument for promoting international safety standards. We will continue to support the IAEA and the peer review process, both scheduling missions in the United States and contributing senior experts to missions in other countries. We look forward to working with our partners around the world to implement the provisions of the action plan.

The Obama Administration is committed to nuclear power as a component of our secure energy future, and we recognize that nuclear power is a vital contributor to the world’s growing energy needs. It is, therefore, not an option that we simply can take off the table. But it is an option that carries special risks and dangers. Therefore, we must do everything possible to ensure its safe and responsible use. We must remain vigilant against outside threats and internal weaknesses to prevent accidents from occurring. We must make continuous improvements to regulations and strengthen implementation of existing conventions so we hold ourselves, and others, to the highest standards. And we must have exhaustive international response plans in place so that if an accident does occur, the damage is contained as much as, and as soon as, possible.

With mutual resolve, and with the IAEA’s continuing leadership, we can make concrete improvements to nuclear safety practices around the world. The United States is eager to work with our fellow members states to achieve this goal. And finally, let me say that, at a time when there is just so much happening in the world, so many both challenges and opportunities, we recognize there are differences of opinion, there are differences in approach, but on this issue we should be all united. There is no room for politics or partisanship, or any other divisiveness. We have to be united. We have to work together. We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to future generations.

Thank you very much.