

Statement by H.E. Tom Grönberg
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Mr. President, On behalf of the Finnish delegation, I would like to join the previous speakers in congratulating you on your election as the President of the 44th General Conference. I would like to assure you of the full support of the Finnish delegation in the fulfilment of your important task this week. May I also take this opportunity to welcome Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and the Central African Republic as new members of the Agency.

I associate myself fully with the statement made by the honourable delegate from France on behalf of the European Union. In addition, I would like to touch upon one area of special interest to my delegation.

Mr. President, If we look in retrospective into the history of the Agency, we can see that especially during the early decades the work was concentrated on creating an international legal and assistance framework which could help the Member States to embark on the use of nuclear energy and of nuclear applications. And of course this work still goes on, even if the emphasis is rather different from the early days, since we now know, that the use of nuclear power and the other applications requires a strong national supporting infrastructure and continuous vigilance.

In those early days of nuclear era relatively little attention was paid to the fact that nuclear reactors have limited lifetimes, albeit longer than anticipated. And the rush to use nuclear applications often pushed to the background the fact that an application may lose its usefulness or its use will, sooner or later, anyway end for other reasons. When nothing else than useless equipment and radioactive wastes is left, the incentive to take good care of the installation or the radioactive source in question has considerably diminished. Therefore, we believe that a rigorous and forward-looking legislative and regulatory framework for radioactive waste management is required and it should be in place already well before the end of the use. Otherwise there is no guarantee against jeopardising the safety of innocent outsiders.

Regrettably, one has to acknowledge that not always and not everywhere have the dangers of nuclear waste and disused radioactive sources been given the attention they deserve. However, if we want to continue the use of the beneficial applications of nuclear energy, everyone of us has to

make strong efforts to build up and maintain the required regulatory framework. Even if one is convinced that nuclear energy is not a real option for the future, one can hardly deny that the radioactive wastes are an important area of work.

Thus, the international community has, especially during the last decennium, become increasingly aware of the growing interdependence of the future use of nuclear energy and the proper handling of this inevitable. This shift of emphasis has been evident also in the work of the Agency already for some time.

Mr. President, The recently accepted concept concerning the work of the Agency is based on the approach of one house which stays on three pillars: safeguards, technology and safety. This formulation, of course, aims to stress the fact that the Agency has a common mission to which all these three pillars contribute and that there must be a strong interaction between all these three pillars. The problems connected with the management of nuclear and other radioactive wastes are an example of an area which does not belong to one pillar only. It is strongly linked to the activities of all three pillars and, in the future, even more so. The safety pillar carries the main responsibility for the Agency's work on nuclear and other radioactive wastes, but also the other pillars must be and are already involved.

In the light of the Annual Report of 1999 and the Programme and Budget for 2001 the Agency's activities in the field of nuclear waste and other radioactive waste management are to be commended.

One of the topics requiring special attention will be the decommissioning of nuclear facilities. This applies especially to the necessary actions that must be taken well in advance before the actual decommissioning starts. Also the consequences of national decisions to decommission all existing nuclear power plants should be assessed from the point of view of maintaining the necessary know-how to carry out the dismantling of these plants and the related waste management far in the future.

New important tasks for the safety pillar will be brought about by the implementation of the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management which may enter into force almost any day now. The preparations for the first review meeting of the Contracting Parties, under this Convention, are already well underway. It is worth

mentioning that, among other things, this Convention also requires that Contracting Parties properly prepare themselves for the future actions in the field of waste management.

Safeguarding of the spent nuclear fuel in interim storage is becoming an increasingly resource-consuming task for the Agency. The integrated safeguards system will create new approaches to this task. At the same time, more and more work is needed to create the safeguards philosophy for the final repositories of spent fuel and especially to reconcile the safeguards requirements with the long-term safety monitoring demands. Because of our strong and topical interest, Finland is an active party to the multinational task “Development of Safeguards for Final Disposal of Spent Fuel in Geological Repositories (SAGOR)”, under the Member States Support Programme to the Agency’s Safeguards.

One of the recent achievements of the Agency is the adoption of the Code of Conduct on the Safety and Security of Radioactive Sources, which the Director General is going to distribute to all States and relevant international organizations as a recommendation. This Code of Conduct also addresses the issues of disused sources and orphan sources. The Agency’s Technical Co-operation programme could be one vehicle to promote the adoption of its principles worldwide.

Mr. President, Let me conclude with a brief note on our national situation in respect of spent fuel management. The Director General, in his statement, stressed that “probably no issue is more critical to the future of nuclear energy than the safe disposal of high level radioactive waste”. I agree with him: The greatest challenges facing the users of nuclear energy and consequently also the Agency are connected with the final disposal of high level waste and spent nuclear fuel. Work is going on in many countries, including my own, to develop acceptable technical solutions as well as to identify prospective sites and to gain public acceptance for their use. In Finland, the approach has been to develop a generic, i.e. not site-specific technical solution and then approach the local communities, mainly through environmental impact assessment procedure. This has been a rather successful approach so far. I am convinced that an important political decision on the final disposal of spent fuel in Finland will be taken during the first half of next year. This will then open up the way for further site specific studies which, in due time, will give basis for decisions on the actual possibility, to use the site for the planned purpose.

Thank you Mr. President