AGENDA ITEM 68

Question of French nuclear tests in the Sahara (A/4183, A/C.1/L.238 and Add.1) (continued)

GENERAL DEBATE (continued)

1. Mr. SASTROAMIDJOJO (Indonesia) said that there were two reasons why he regretted the need for examining the question of the French tests in the Sahara. First, the Committee had just adopted (1042nd meeting) unanimously a draft resolution on the question of general and complete disarmament which encouraged the hope that an agreement on the total cessation of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons tests would soon be concluded. Secondly, failure to reach a satisfactory settlement of the present problem might well threaten the progress made in relations between East and West on the one hand and between the West and the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa on the other.

2. Whereas the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union had decided to suspend nuclear tests, France had announced its decision to carry out such tests in the Sahara. There was, moreover, a risk that this decision, which could only be interpreted as being in complete disregard of the Geneva Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Weapons Tests, would encourage other countries to join in the nuclear armaments race, which would then attain horrifying proportions.

3. The anxiety aroused by the French decision was not confined to the African continent; but the disapproval voiced by a number of Asian Heads of Government, including the President of Indonesia, Mr. Sukarno, had availed as little as had the direct representations made to the French Government by various African Governments. France's fixation of purpose in the matter constituted defiance of the legitimate rights of the African peoples, who asked for nothing more than respect and mutual understanding.

4. France had sought to minimize the dangers inherent in its experimentaton. At the 1043rd meeting, the French representative had provided copious statistics on atomic radiation, but such figures were only averages and not exact figures applicable to areas of diverse character with varying densities of population. Among his sources Mr. Moch had mentioned the report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (A/3838). In fact, in that report, the Scientific Committee had warned against possible underestimations and its conclusions left no room for the optimism expressed by the French representative. Mr. Sastroamidjojo cited in that regard paragraphs 49 and 55 of chapter VII of the report. He observed that the conclusions reached by the group of scientists, some of whom were French, painted a picture very different from that presented by Mr. Moch.

5. Moreover, France was fully aware of the harmful consequences that those tests might have; otherwise it would not have felt the need for such stringent precautions and the choice of an area so far removed from France. But even if its precautionary measures made the danger practically negligible, it was impossible to accept the contention that France had the right to protect the populations of independent, sovereign States and the dependent peoples of Africa from a danger which it intended to export to the African continent itself. The United Nations was responsible for the health, safety and well-being of the dependent peoples of Africa. Moreover, the Governments of the independent States could protect their own peoples.

6. The burden of Mr. Moch's argument was a comparison between the French tests to take place in the Sahara and the past explosions set off by the United States, the United Kingdom and the USSR. In the first place, the Indonesian delegation had always opposed, and always would oppose, nuclear weapons tests conducted by any country in any area of the world. Past tests in no way constituted a sanction for the tests planned by France. In the second place, his delegation firmly rejected the psychology of the arms race, which was the very form of competition for human destruction that the United Nations was seeking to eliminate. In the third place, to stress that the explosion in the Sahara would be less powerful than those carried out in the Pacific was the same kind of reasoning as that of the "clean" and the "dirty" bomb. The explosion of any kind of bomb endangered the health of mankind, and thus should not be allowed by the United Nations.

7. It was strange that Mr. Moch had asked the Committee to allow reasoning to prevail over sentiment and knowledge over emotion, as if the parties supporting a thesis in the United Nations were ruled entirely by emotion and those opposing it entirely by reason. Was it not reasonable to want to live a healthy life and, on the other hand, were there not strong elements of emotion and sentiment in France's desire to achieve prestige in the nuclear field? As for knowledge, no one could reasonably claim to have flawless scientific knowledge about radio-activity. Each year there had been new information, causing scientists to make a drastic revision of their ideas about the hazards of fall-out and of radio-activity in general. In the past few years, for instance, it had been shown that the duration of fall-out in the atmosphere was much
shorter than had previously been believed; it had also been established that it was incorrect to suppose that stratospheric fall-out spread uniformly throughout the earth. The one thing known with certainty at the present time was that every increase of radiation was a danger to the human race.

8. When France stated that, in the absence of a general agreement on nuclear disarmament applying to all without distinction, it was unwilling to submit to discriminatory treatment, it might well be asked whether France was willing to open the door to nuclear armaments in every country of the world without distinction. Such an eventually could hardly be countenanced with calmness. The views of eminent scientists on the dangers to which an increase in the present level of radio-activity would give rise justified the conclusion that the French tests would not merely add to the amount of strontium-90 in the soil and in foods, and in human and animal bone, but would also release copious amounts of shorter-lived radio-active substances. According to Dr. Schubert, of the Argonne National Laboratory in Lemont (Illinois), it was now known that 2 roentgens could produce cancer in a child. Mr. Moch could therefore hardly assert that the projected Sahara tests would not involve any risk for the rest of the world, since he himself had said that under certain atmospheric conditions and at a specified distance from the place of the explosion people would absorb fewer than 2.5 roentgens; which, in his view, was not a dangerous dose. Dr. Schubert had estimated that, during its nine-month gestation period, a child at present received a total dosage of 20 milliroentgens from fall-out and that such a dosage could mean an increase of 1 per cent in the total number of children under ten who died of cancer each year.

9. Another reason why the Committee could not accept Mr. Moch's insensitive appraisal of the number of persons imperilled was that it was not the number that was important, but the right of people not to be exposed to such risks. Mr. Moch had stated that the numerous explosions which had taken place in the United States and the USSR had led to no incidents and involved no risks and that, a fortiori, the French experiment should create no danger for anyone. His conclusion would be invalid if it could be shown that the trials in Nevada, for instance, had led to incidents and had involved risks. It was now agreed that fall-out had genetic effects. He referred to the statement concerning such effects made by the President of the United States, Mr. Eisenhower, on 23 October 1966, in connexion with the possibility of incidents, to an article which appeared in the American magazine The Reporter of 16 May 1957, from which it was clear that, as a result of a series of tests carried out in Nevada in the spring of 1953, certain persons had been taken ill, animals had been burnt and some centres of population had been subjected to radiation above the permissible concentration.

10. Mr. Moch has asked whether the leader's role was to follow his troops or to lead them; Mr. Sastramidjojo considered that the role of leadership was to secure the well-being of peoples in peace, and not to carry out nuclear tests which endangered human health. It was even stranger to hear nuclear tests being equated with the education and development of man. Again, it was difficult to understand why France, after having sought for ten years to set an example by pioneering in nuclear research for peaceful purposes, was abruptly changing that admirable policy just when there was, at long last, a real hope that its example would be followed by the other nuclear Powers. Furthermore, France reserved the right to continue tests, after an agreement on their cessation had been reached by the three nuclear Powers, until such time as they had renounced all nuclear armaments and had agreed to halt, under international control, the production of fissionable materials for military purposes, to begin the reconversion of their stockpiles and to eliminate the vehicles for those explosives. That was a deplorable attitude: it amounted to asking for nuclear disarmament for all, but, in the meantime, nuclear armament for all.

11. His delegation stood for the cause of peace through nuclear disarmament. It therefore sincerely urged France to seek security in the world of today through friendship and mutual understanding, and it once again expressed the hope that the collective conscience of mankind would induce France to desist from its stand and to strive instead for prestige in the peaceful uses of atomic energy. With that in view, it invited members of the Committee to vote for the joint draft resolution (A/C.1/L.238 and Add.1) in the light of the fact that many delegations were, to say the least, doubtful about the risks involved in the explosion planned.

12. Mr. SHUKAIRY (Saudi Arabia) thought that the Committee had been wise to decide to examine the question of French nuclear tests in the Sahara immediately after the question of disarmament. The present debate would show whether the statements made on disarmament had been sincere and, in particular, whether the representative of France was in fact in favour of disarmament or of rearmament.

13. It must be recognized that, although the arguments of the French representative were not valid, they had been delivered with great skill and constituted a brilliant appeal for a lost cause. However, although not possessing the scientific knowledge of the French experts, the small countries were in a position to form an opinion on the matter thanks to the work of numerous scientists and, in particular, the report of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation. The French representative had tried to unleash a scientific cold war by stating that the world was bathed in radiations. But, as had been shown by many scientific works, there was no need for anxiety over radiation from natural sources. The point at issue was man-made radio-activity, and it was for that reason that the item had been placed on the agenda. As British scientists had stated, man was accustomed to a certain amount of radiation, but it would be dangerous to increase it. That was precisely the effect which nuclear tests in the Sahara would have.

14. The French representative argued that the radiations from the French explosions would be so small as to be without harmful effect. However, as had been attested by a number of scientists, including the members of the Scientific Committee, very little was known about the real effect of small doses of irradiation. On the other hand, it was known that there was no cure for contamination. There could be no question, therefore, of taking such a chance—despite the assertions of the French representative, who...
allowed himself to be more categorical than the experts themselves, since he stated quite unequivocally that a particular dose could not be dangerous. The Scientific Committee had admitted that knowledge in that field was very limited. It was true that that Committee was concerned only for the security of the human race and was not, like France, thirsting for rearmament.

15. Given the genetic effects of radiation, nuclear testing was an undeclared war, not only against the present generation, but against the generations to come. Moreover, it was contrary to true science, which should be in the service of mankind. In any event, the French representative's claim that the nuclear tests would make practically no contribution to the contamination of the atmosphere was refuted by the conclusions of the Scientific Committee, which had specifically recommended the cessation of tests so that contamination of the environment should cease. That Committee had added that even the smallest amount of radiation was liable to cause deleterious genetic and also somatic effects, and British scientists had asserted that the rate of cancer would increase unless nuclear tests were halted. According to American scientists, the number of mutations caused by nuclear tests was considerable, and the defects resulting were well known. There was thus absolutely no doubt—as even a French scientist, Mr. Jacques Parisot, dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Nancy, had pointed out—that nuclear tests were extremely dangerous to human health.

16. Mr. Moch had talked about safe doses of irradiation. While his individual figures were correct, the conclusions which he had drawn from them were erroneous. The present state of scientific knowledge did not warrant such positive judgements. The Scientific Committee had observed that a slow rise in environmental radioactivity could cause appreciable damage before it could be definitely identified as due to irradiation. In any event, all authorities on the subject stressed that every effort should be made to diminish and not to increase the level of radiation. That was the opinion, for instance, of the International Commission on Radiological Protection. It imposed a moral obligation on France to renounce its experiments. British scientists had concluded that the maximum dose of radiation which could be received without harm was zero. The Committee on Genetic Effects of Atomic Radiation of the United States National Academy of Sciences shared that view. The Special Sub-Committee on Radiation of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy of the United States Congress considered that, if the present rate of testing was continued, there would be thousands or tens of thousands of persons who would be diseased or deformed, or who could die prematurely, as a consequence of fall-out.

17. The more that became known about radioactivity, the more dangerous it was perceived to be. In 1925, the maximum permissible dose had been set at 0.2 roentgen per day; in 1936, at 0.1 per day; in 1950, at 0.3 per week; and in 1957, at 0.096 per week. It would be tragic to ignore, as Mr. Moch had done, the warnings of so many experts.

18. During the debates which had been proceeding for a number of years on the question of nuclear tests, Mr. Moch had on many occasions spoken in favour of halting them. At the twelfth session (877th meeting), he had called for a two-year suspension, and had quoted the principle: "When in doubt, abstain". During the thirteenth session, on 22 October 1958 (956th meeting), addressing the representative of Bulgaria, Mr. Moch had emphasized the danger of radiation arising from the explosion of a Soviet bomb of several megatons. Thus, where the socialist countries were concerned, the French representative was anxious about the risks involved in nuclear tests; but if the testing was being done by his own country, he ignored them. In point of fact, he wished France to become an atomic Power; once that aim was fixed, he cared very little about the victims. Mr. Moch claimed to be inspired by Jean Jaurès' dictum to the effect that courage consisted in seeking the truth and telling it; could he explain which, among his contradictory statements of 1957–1958 and of 1959, represented the truth?

19. Mr. Moch recognized that the masses throughout the world were unanimous in opposing nuclear experiments; but he thought that the leaders could not, merely in order to please them, renounce the benefits of such tests. However, fear of test explosions had not originated with the masses. It was the intellectuals who had been the first to emphasize the dangers. Pope Pius XII, Bertrand Russell, Mr. Nehru, Mr. Sukarno and many other leading personalities had all condemned them.

20. Lastly, the French representative had said that his country could not agree to any arms monopoly and that the build-up of French defences was the concern of France alone. That was a dangerous statement; for all other countries might argue in the same way, which would result in Europe soon being transformed into an arsenal of atomic bombs and the present favourable atmosphere in international relations being destroyed. France could not be permitted to relaunch the world into an armaments race and to proceed to its experiment at the very moment when the three nuclear Powers were negotiating a controlled prohibition of tests.

21. France would do well to face present-day realities. The past was the past, and France would be mistaken to let itself be driven on by a thirst for glory. It was no longer the great Power of former times, and it was futile for it to try to be what it was not. If, proportionately, the French bomb was not of great destructive power, it was not for reasons of modesty or humanity, but because France lacked resources. The explosion of the bomb would add to the bankruptcy of a country which was already on the edge of ruin.

22. Mr. MOCH (France), raising a point of order, said that he could not tolerate the slanderous attacks which the representative of Saudi Arabia was making against France, and requested the Chairman to call him to order.

23. The CHAIRMAN asked the representative of Saudi Arabia to continue without using sharp words. Only moderation could create a favourable atmosphere for the Committee's work.

24. Mr. SHUKAIRY (Saudi Arabia) said that he was not attacking France, but was trying to convince the Committee that that country's attacks on the security of mankind could not be tolerated. France was not concerned with a question of defence: in fact, the defence of France was the responsibility of the United
States of America. The French experiment could serve no useful purpose.

25. The Saudi Arabian delegation was against all nuclear tests. It hoped therefore that the draft resolution before the Committee, which was very moderate in tone, would receive unanimous support.

26. Mr. LODGE (United States of America) said that his country favoured the conclusion of an agreement to end all nuclear weapons tests under effective control. If the Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Weapons Tests, now being held at Geneva, was successful, States which were not taking part in the negotiations should accede to the agreement concluded, that would not only result in the cessation of tests, but would help to create favourable conditions for the solution of the general problem of disarmament.

27. In regard to the dangers of experimental explosions, the United States had carried out several experiments in Nevada at a distance of only eighty-five miles from Las Vegas; all the proper safety measures had been taken, and the tests had not endangered the neighbouring centres of population in any way. The increase in radiation to which a person could be exposed as a result of all past experimental explosions was lower than the natural increase to which he would be subject if he climbed from sea level to an altitude of a few hundred feet. The contribution of a small nuclear explosion to the total amount of fission debris already in the atmosphere would be inconsiderable.

28. The United States Government had no technical information about the French experiment but, according to the French Government, the device was small, all the necessary precautions would be taken and the explosion would occur several hundred kilometres away from the nearest centre of population. The experience acquired by the United States in that field was germane to the question of the health hazards which the French tests would involve.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.