

## Risky Business

The Secretary General's High Level Summit on Nuclear Safety and Security earlier today produced some striking policy suggestions and divergent approaches regarding levels of acceptable risk for expanding nuclear energy facilities.

The points of consensus during the Summit were considerable and somewhat predictable: strengthening the IAEA, applying the highest safety standards to all nuclear power plants, ensuring public confidence and trust, etc. These recommendations were supplemented by more progressive perspectives, including the French President's call for a 'rapid intervention force for nuclear safety and security' that appears to fundamentally mirror our own proposal for a UN Emergency Peace Service. Colombia also called for a quite promising treaty focused on safe and secure nuclear transport. And Brazil (quite rightly in our view) linked the nuclear power issue to other NPT-related responsibilities for disarmament and non-proliferation, precluding what the Brazilian president referred to as 'nuclear privilege.'

For some governments, such as the US, nuclear power is an option that 'cannot be taken off the table.' There seems to be a deep belief on the part of many governments that the rigorous application of robust technologies and more coordinated safety and security policies will result in a nuclear industry that can operate at acceptable levels of risk.

In this vein, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reminded governments that the high safety standards endorsed by many governments should be adopted without political considerations. What must still be discussed, of course, is the considerable faith that states seem to have in technology and in the attentiveness of policymakers and technical experts to both apply high standards and to assess risk with a more humble framework. If this year of manifold natural dangers has taught us anything, it is that such disasters not only know no borders but can create drastic consequences that easily circumvent both national boundaries and our most confident technologies.

The caution expressed by Lithuania (and reinforced by Amb. Duarte of UNODA) should be our caution as well. No matter how robust our communications or transparent our technological applications, the impact of reactor failure on citizens beyond the borders of the host state are grave. The international preoccupation with the state of the Fukushima reactor even more than on the restoration of Japanese tsunami victims speaks volumes to the perceived dangers that nuclear meltdown pose and constitutes an acknowledgment that natural forces that can nullify the best technological plans and stymie the most attentive nuclear experts.

The Indonesian delegation and other speakers reminded the audience that there is indeed a 'right' to acquire and use peaceful nuclear energy, though most also noted that safety must be the first consideration. However, until we can guarantee safety rather than merely urging it, anyone espousing a 'right' grounded in sovereignty that is explicitly endorsed by the NPT process also needs to explain how reactors destroyed by natural disaster, inadequate nuclear storage, and poorly maintained nuclear facilities could ever be only a 'sovereign problem.'

Early notification of accidents is important but not sufficient. Improving international safety and security standards related to construction and maintenance as well as rapid response to accidents is likewise essential, but does not in and of itself represent full, 'good faith' compliance with our responsibility to protect civilians within and beyond borders from radiation and other impacts from nuclear catastrophe. The 'global nuclear safety culture' envisioned by the Germans must start, first and foremost, with honest risk assessments of nuclear leakage as well as honest discussions of the health and safety repercussions in cases where our assessments prove faulty. Citizens worldwide demanding inexhaustible supplies of accessible, affordable energy must begin to make judgments about this energy similar to those they make every day in their families – the points at which risk mitigates desire. Whether nuclear energy ultimately poses risks to our planet greater than fossil fuels and their extraction industries is open to debate. The deadly consequences of nuclear mis-step, however, are not.