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HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 161206a

Tuesday 06.12.2016

The Holy See at the Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency: an ethic of responsibility for nuclear security

“An ethic of responsibility for nuclear security” was the theme of the address given by Msgr. Antoine Camilleri, under-secretary for Relations with States, at the International Conference on Nuclear Security”, organised by the International Atomic Energy Agency and held in Vienna, Austria from 5 to 9 December.

The prelate recalled that Pope Francis, in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015, urged the international community “to work for a world free of nuclear weapons, in full application of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in letter and spirit, with the goal of a complete prohibition of these weapons’. The Holy See is, therefore, most pleased to attend this Conference, thereby lending its support to advancing nuclear security”.

“The promotion of nuclear security – preventing, detecting and responding to criminal or intentional unauthorised acts involving, or directed at, nuclear material, other radioactive material, associated facilities or associated activities – is of significant importance to the Holy See. On the one hand, nuclear security advances peace and security by contributing towards strengthening the non-proliferation regime and making much-needed progress toward nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, nuclear security – so closely linked to nuclear safety and a broader ‘safety culture’ – promotes social and scientific development by the peaceful application of nuclear technologies to promote sustainable development by improving agriculture, water management, nutrition and food safety, infectious disease control, and efforts to fight cancer”.

Msgr. Camilleri went on to acknowledge the progress made in strengthening nuclear security and safety, such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1540, the Nuclear Security Summits, the Nuclear Terrorism Convention, and the IAEA’s Codes of Conduct on the Safety and Security of Radioactive Sources and on Research Reactors. “The very existence and the professional activity of the International Atomic Energy Agency also constitute crucial aspects of the work towards nuclear safety”, he observed, “and the Holy See takes this opportunity to thank the Director General and the entire staff of the Agency for their labours in this regard”.

“At the same time, we should not be complacent”, he continued. “The promotion of nuclear security faces significant challenges, including the limited, insufficient and often stalled efforts to prevent proliferation and move

toward a world free of nuclear weapons. Therefore, to respond adequately to the challenges of nuclear security, the Holy See believes it to be essential that the international community embrace an ethic of responsibility, in order to foster a climate of trust, and to strengthen cooperative security through multilateral dialogue”.

“The logic of fear and mistrust that is epitomised by nuclear deterrence must be replaced with a new global ethic. We need an ethic of responsibility, solidarity, and cooperative security adequate to the task of controlling the power of nuclear technology. Threats to nuclear security represent serious technical and diplomatic challenges. These must be tackled by addressing the wider security, political, economic and cultural dynamics that lead state and non-state actors to seek security, legitimacy, and power in nuclear weapons. Therefore, the critically important work of strengthening nuclear security must be done in the context of much broader efforts to promote socio-economic development, political participation, respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law, and cooperation and solidarity at the regional and international level”.

The under-secretary for Relations with States mentioned, in this context, two fields of particular interest to the Holy See: the physical protection of nuclear material and counteracting insider threats as well as preventing cyber attacks on sensitive data and facilities.

With regard to the first, he emphasised the need to ensure that nuclear and other radioactive material is safely contained, as failure to control nuclear material could have catastrophic consequences. In relation to the second, he reiterated the importance of attention to strengthening information and computer security as well as to ensuring the confidentiality of information pertaining to nuclear security.

“On both issues, it must be recalled that although the responsibility for maintaining effective nuclear security of all nuclear and radioactive material within a State rests primarily with that State, cooperation between States is essential as so many threats to nuclear security do not respect borders and are facilitated by the political instability and crises that sadly plague numerous parts of our world”, he affirmed. “The Holy See is, therefore, pleased that great efforts have been made by the IAEA and its member states to strengthen the security regime, to assign a high priority to it and to improve and complement the regulations and the legal framework for it. These efforts have to be continued”.

“Much of the IAEA’s success in fulfilling its responsibilities depends on the commitment of Member States to live up to their legal and ethical obligations”, he remarked. “Therefore, the responsibilities of the Member States must remain at the heart of our discussions. This burden of responsibility falls most heavily, of course, on those Member States that possess nuclear capacity, especially those with nuclear weapons”.

To conclude, Msgr. Camilleri noted that the Holy See has no illusions about the challenges that lie before the international community. “However, it is precisely because of these challenges related to nuclear security that the Holy See wishes to reiterate its support for the IAEA as it seeks to fulfil, in ever more effective ways, its indispensable role in ensuring nuclear security as part of a wider effort to strengthen cooperative security”. He cited the words of the Holy Father in his message to the Vienna Conference in 2014: “The security of our own future depends on guaranteeing the peaceful security of others, for if peace, security and stability are not established globally, they will not be enjoyed at all”.
