Submitted by United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Secretary General’s Report on

A/RES/78/240 “Addressing the Legacy of Nuclear Weapons: Providing Victim Assistance and Environmental Remediation to Member States Affected by the Use or Testing of Nuclear Weapons”

31 May 2024

The United Kingdom voted against resolution A/RES/78/240, ‘Addressing the Legacy of Nuclear Weapons’ at the UN General Assembly in 2023. We made an Explanation of Vote to set out the reasons for that decision.

Nonetheless, following the request from the Secretary General for information to support his preparation of the report requested by the resolution, the UK submits its position on the legacy of nuclear testing and subsequent remediation efforts.

The UK conducted 12 nuclear weapon tests and a few hundred smaller scale tests in Australia between 1952 and 1963. Nine nuclear explosions were also carried out between 1957 and 1958 at Malden Island and Christmas Island (Kiritimati – now part of the Republic of Kiribati) in the Pacific Ocean.

We pay tribute to the veterans and civilians from the Pacific region involved in the tests. The UK supports the call to all states and international organisations that have expertise in the field of clean-up and disposal of radioactive contaminants to consider giving appropriate assistance (technical or financial), as may be requested, for remedial purposes in affected areas.

In 1993, following a report by the Australian Royal Commission on the conduct of British nuclear tests in Australia, the UK Government worked with the Australian Government to agree an ex-gratia payment of £20 million. This payment was part of a full and final settlement to the Australian Government to support the rehabilitation of former nuclear test sites. The UK considers its remediation efforts in regard to testing conducted in Australia to be complete.

In regard to Kiritimati, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) arranged and took part in a specialist Reconnaissance Survey on Kiritimati during September 1998 to identify the types and quantities of waste materials, including an assessment of environmental risks, arising from the island’s use as a base for the UK’s nuclear test programme in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A further visit was made to Kiritimati in August 2000 by UK MOD and independent specialists to gather further detailed information for the proposed clean-up project. Removal of waste was undertaken between 2005 and 2008, including radioactive and non-radioactive materials. The UK considers its remediation efforts on Kiritimati to have been completed.
Independent studies commissioned by the UK MOD and carried out by the UK National Radiological Protection Board and Imperial Cancer Research have found that overall mortality of the test veterans and military controls remain lower than the general population of men of the same age during the period of 1952-2017.

For further information, extensive reports on scientific information concerning historic atmospheric nuclear weapon tests, including activity undertaken on remediation, can be found here:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-atmospheric-nuclear-weapons-tests-factsheets

Finally, the UK is committed to the twin goals of a world without explosive nuclear testing and without nuclear weapons, in line with our obligations under the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). We signed the CTBT when it was first opened for signature in 1996, and we continue to call for its entry into force of the as soon as possible. In the interim, the UK continues to maintain its voluntary moratorium on explosive nuclear testing. We also maintain a voluntary moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear explosive devices, and continue to press for the immediate commencement and early conclusions of negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) in the Conference on Disarmament.