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MOTION TO INVITE THE GOVERNMENT TO OBTAIN
COMPENSATION FOR VOLUNTEERS AND CIVILIAN MEMBERS
OF NATIONAL DEFENCE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHALK RIVER
NUCLEAR REACTOR ADOPTED

Speech by:

The Honourable Judith Seidman

Tuesday, March 22, 2016

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MOTION TO INVITE THE GOVERNMENT TO OBTAIN
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OF THE CHALK RIVER NUCLEAR
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Hon. Judith Seidman: Honourable senators, I rise today to speak to you about Senator Hervieux-Payette's Motion No. 6. It calls on the Government of Canada to establish a program similar to the Atomic Veterans Recognition Program, and offers \$24,000 in compensation to the civilians and employees who volunteered to help decontaminate the Chalk River nuclear site in 1952 and 1958.

As most of us already know, in 1952, Chalk River became the first serious nuclear reactor accident in the world. Human error and mechanical design faults were concluded to be the cause. At the time, there were no apparent injuries, and the surrounding population was not particularly frightened by reports of potential risks.

Employees and volunteers took it upon themselves to begin the cleanup, exposing themselves to the radiation fields of a very contaminated building site. Military support was called in two days later to help with the cleanup operation along with continued civilian and employee collaboration. Then, back in 1952, understanding of the exposure effects of nuclear radiation was so limited that foreign governments offered to help with the cleanup, as well, in order to learn and train their own personnel.

Later, in 1958, a rupture occurred at Chalk River due to a mechanical failure which led to the nuclear contamination of the reactor hall. Staff had to carry sandbags into the reactor hall in order to limit burning of the fuel rods. They were exposed to debris and contamination from the burning rods. It took 300 AECL staff to decontaminate this site.

The first AECL follow-up report to these incidents was conducted in 1982. It was meant to assess the long-term health impacts on civilians, both AECL and volunteers involved in the decontamination process of the 1952 incident.

The second follow-up report was conducted to provide details on the decontamination process as well as information on the type of work performed, the exposures of the staff and statistics on the radiation dosage that occurred as a result of the 1958 nuclear incident. Both reports concluded that "the exposed participants did not suffer any observable health differences when compared with the general population of Ontario." In fact, it was observable differences in mortality rates of those involved in the decontamination process that were compared to those of the general population of Ontario at the time.

Honourable senators, there are significant questions about the findings in both follow-up reports. Questions include ones around

a faulty study methodology that focuses only on excess mortality as opposed to excess morbidity. One would expect serious chronic illness issues as a result of such toxic exposure.

Also, it is likely that the results of these studies showing no excess mortality and never examining morbidity will have formed the basis of the original decisions not to compensate the AECL employees and volunteers who worked at the decontamination scene at the very outset and may have been the most exposed. In addition, it is said that comparisons with the general population of Ontario, not adjusted for socio-economic status and education, would lead to biased mortality estimates. Ultimately, information collected about these workers has provided good data about the long-term health hazards associated with such nuclear accidents.

Honourable senators, in 2008, the government decided on a special compensation for veterans and employees of the Department of National Defence involved in hazardous events where nuclear radiation was present. This compensation program included military personnel involved in the Chalk River decontamination operations. Special efforts must now be made to implement a similar program to compensate those civilian volunteers and AECL staff who were also involved in the very same decontamination operations at Chalk River.

We can look to our southern neighbour for inspiration. In 1990, the United States Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. It provided compensation to individuals who contracted certain cancers and other serious illnesses following their exposure to radiation released during atmospheric nuclear testing or after employment in the uranium industry. The act provides compensation to individuals who contracted one of 27 medical conditions, and it includes civilian workers, military personnel and civilians located in "downwind" areas near the testing site.

Honourable senators, not one of us would suggest that nuclear radiation contamination and the resulting exposures at the Chalk River nuclear facility in the 1952 and 1958 incidents should be ignored in the cases of volunteers but not in the cases of military personnel. I support Senator Hervieux-Payette when she asks us to ensure that those former AECL employees — perhaps there are 102 of them, both deceased and those still alive — who worked the Chalk River decontamination process in 1952 and 1958 receive the same financial compensation that was given to National Defence personnel. As she says: Justice should be done. It is the right thing to do.

Some Hon. Senators: Question.

The Hon. the Speaker: Is it your pleasure, honourable senators, to adopt the motion?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to.)