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Nuclear communities say environment and jobs at risk from enforced early plant closures

Civic leaders across Europe have spoken out against the danger to communities posed by nuclear power plants which are forced to shut down before their time.

The warning was issued during a two-day conference in Brussels – *Local democracies and nuclear power plants* – which was organised by the Group of European Municipalities with Nuclear Facilities and their Futures (GMF).

GMF's aim is for the voice of nuclear communities to be heard in key discussion groups and in the European Union's decision making process.

European Parliament vice-president and Spanish Euro MP, Alejo Vidal-Quadras Roca, told the gathering of more than 300 delegates, many of whom were from Sweden, Germany, Spain and the UK, that they should regard themselves as municipalities "with an essential economic activity" in their areas.

Torsten Carlsson, the president of KSO which represents Sweden's nuclear municipalities, said in the event of a complete nuclear phase-out in that country by 2005, up to 4000 people directly employed by nuclear plants would be jobless. Thousands more jobs would be lost in sub-contract work and from the knock-on effect to shops, schools and restaurants.

The local mayor of the district which is home to Sweden's Barsebäck plant, Roland Palmqvist, said the closure of unit 1 last November had been a blow for employees, the municipality and the region as a whole.

Foratom secretary general Dr Wolf-J. Schmidt-Küster, said any future decline in the contribution of nuclear energy at the European regional level would have serious implications for strategic energy policy and meeting environmental targets. "The EU currently depends on external sources for 50% of its energy supply and this figure is expected to rise to 70% by 2020. With reduced reliance on nuclear, that percentage would increase still further and the EU would find it all the more difficult to meet its Kyoto commitments."

The head of the European Commission's new directorate general for transport and energy,

Francois Lamoureux, said issues of nuclear safety had been an "opaque" area in the past, but it was now possible to have greater transparency. Of nuclear in general he said: "There are fears with respect to this sector, but beyond those fears, we have to realise that this form of energy has certain advantages – competitiveness, security of supply and respect for the environment."

GMF is calling on the European Union to formulate a precise energy policy, incorporating the future of nuclear power along with common rules concerning environmental impact studies.

Report warns of economic shock if Swiss phase-out nuclear

Proposals which could lead to a phase-out of nuclear energy in Switzerland would cost the national economy tens of billions of Swiss francs and trigger a seismic economic shock, according to a recent study commissioned by the country's nuclear utilities.

Two political initiatives are likely to be put to a national referendum within the next few years. One (Moratorium Plus) would call for a public referendum for authorising the operation of existing nuclear power plants beyond 40 years, and for an extension of the current 10-year moratorium on new nuclear plants for a further 10 years. The report says this proposal would cost the economy nearly CHF 30 billion in additional costs, compared with the reference scenario where two first generation nuclear power plants are supposed to operate for 50 years and Switzerland's other two plants, with newer units, for 60 years.

The second initiative (Power Without Atoms) would see a rapid phasing out of nuclear energy. It would mean the shut-down of two of the four nuclear power plants two years after the vote and of the remainder after 30 years of operation. The report says the switch to non-nuclear energy sources would cost around CHF 40 billion.

Professor Silvio Borner of the centre for economic sciences at Basel university said the loss of capital would be "the economic equivalent of a major earthquake". He said the study showed that Switzerland's nuclear plants were competitive in

the liberalised electricity market and although they were costly to build, their operational value for money compared to other sources of power. Restricting the operations of nuclear units "was not an exercise for politicians, and . . . it would be counterproductive for safety and nonsense for the economy", he added.

The chief executive of the Nordostschweizerische Kraftwerke (NOK), Dr Peter Wiederkehr, who is also president of the group of the main Swiss power utilities, said that a phase-out would force utilities to look elsewhere to satisfy the country's power needs – which would mean imports from foreign nuclear plants, or power from gas or coal-fired stations with their consequent deleterious effects on the environment

Japan loses Saudi drilling rights

Japan has lost its oil drilling rights in Saudi Arabia after rejecting renewal conditions which involved the construction and operation of a railway line estimated to cost more than 200 billion yen.

Japan's Arabian Oil Co had held the drilling rights for nearly 40 years and the move is expected to cut its oil production in the region by half. The Tokyo-based company will continue operation in the Kuwaiti half of the Khafji oil field, along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border, at least until present contracts with the Kuwaiti government expire in three years time. The Saudi government is to seize the assets of Arabian Oil in the area and operate them through a state-run subsidiary.

Daily production in the Khafji oil field totals 280000 barrels which is the equivalent of about 3.5% of Japan's total crude oil imports.

Workers win legal round in fight to save N-Plant jobs

A Dutch court has ruled in favour of employees at the Borssele nuclear power plant who claimed government attempts to force the early closure of their workplace was illegal.

In December 1994 the Dutch parliament narrowly voted in favour of shutting down the country's only operating plant at the end of 2003, even though the operating licence had been renewed just four

months earlier and no expiry date was specified.

The workers claimed that writing in an expiry date later was incompatible with Dutch atomic law which specifies grounds on which a licence can be revoked. The Dutch high administrative court ruled that as the decree had not been reviewed on these grounds it had no legal basis.

News of the court's decision reached members of parliament during a debate on a national energy report from the economics ministry which said nuclear energy was advantageous from both an economic and environmental point of view. However, the government says it will try to find other ways of enforcing Borssele's early closure.

Gas company cuts country's supply over debt

Authorities in Moldova are reportedly trying to arrange alternative gas deliveries after Russia cut supplies to the country in February in a dispute over unpaid bills.

Russian gas company Gazprom only agreed to resume supplies after Moldova promised to pay a debt of 11 million dollars, to prevent defaulters from receiving gas and to stop illegal gas suppliers. The Moldovan power industry is virtually totally dependent on Russian gas deliveries and the government is now said to be considering the possibility of negotiating alternative gas deliveries from Turkmenistan.

Nations unite to plan nuclear options

An international study group is to investigate advanced nuclear reactor technology as an option for supplying future energy needs. Representatives of the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, France, Japan, South Korea, South Africa, the UK and US made the decision at an international workshop supported by the US Department of Energy (DOE). The group will look at so called Generation 4 technology – nuclear power systems that may be bought within the next 20 years to cope with growth in demand from developing countries.

A detailed statement from the countries can be found on the DOE website (<http://www.ne.doe.gov/jointstatement.html>).

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