
Japan responding to fuel plant accident

Japanese safety officials and police are continuing their investigations into the accident which exposed 70 workers to radiation at Tokai Mura uranium conversion test facility.

Three of the workers were seriously injured in the September 30 "flash criticality" – reportedly caused by company and workers breaching safety regulations.

For safety exchanges, Japan is to set up a "national version" of the World Association of Nuclear Operators, but in Japan covering the fuel cycle as well as nuclear power plants.

The problems raised by the accident are a "separate issue" to Japan's overall nuclear energy policy, says new international trade & industry minister Takashi Fukaya. He points out that the accident was at a fuel facility, not at a nuclear reactor – and that the two should not be confused.

Japan has 52 reactors producing around 35% of its electricity. Another five power reactors are under construction or firmly planned.

Nuclear is "essential" to resource-short Japan, adds the new head of the country's Science & Technology Agency, Hirofumi Nakasone.

More nuclear power "inevitable" says World Energy Council

"No matter how special interest groups try to cut it, new nuclear power is a key part of the world's energy wardrobe now and in the years to come," says World Energy Council (WEC) secretary general Gerald Doucet.

"I see the future of nuclear power as first and foremost a business that has to prove itself in the marketplace. I welcome the evidence of the nuclear industry's recent success in this regard, that it has become more transparent, less arrogant about public concerns and, above all, ready to address customer choice in a liberalised market.

"These are key reasons why I believe new nuclear power generation is inevitable, not just in countries such as Korea and Japan, but also in Europe and the US. It is my firm hope that the nuclear industry will join WEC in making nuclear power part of the solution to the commercial energy needs of Africa, Latin America, Asia and parts of central and eastern Europe."

The WEC chief was addressing The Uranium Institute annual symposium in London.

Ethics group calls for open approach to nuclear energy

A Belgian working group of scientists, theologians, philosophers and general public is calling for a balanced and objective approach to nuclear energy.

The ethics group – set up by the Bishop of Bruges to develop the position of the Belgian Catholic Church – concludes that nuclear stands up very well in comparison to other energy sources. Nuclear is one of the world's "potentials", with humankind being responsible for using it ethically and safely.

The problems facing nuclear energy are mainly political and psychological, says the working group.

It questions whether opposition to nuclear energy is morally justified for future generations, and whether it is right to "squander" and burn finite materials, such as coal, gas and oil, that could be used in future for many purposes other than to generate electricity.

For details of the working group's analysis, fax Chris Dierick in Brussels on +32 2 505 0790.

Forced closure of German N-plants "would breach constitution"

Any government move to close German nuclear power stations without consent of their owners – or full financial compensation – would violate the federal constitution (the Basic Law).

That's the verdict of constitutional expert Udo di Fabio (Munich), speaking as a government working group prepares to publish its view of key legal issues in the Red-Green governing coalition's plan to quit nuclear.

During a discussion organised in Berlin by the German Atomic Forum, Prof. di Fabio stressed that Basic Law article 14 protects rights of ownership.

Thus, a phase-out order "should be considered in legal terms as appropriation of property, because it amounts to a deliberate change to a legal position which was until now based on property rights."

The nuclear issue has replaced ideological conflicts, says German Social Democrat Rolf Linkohr, chair of the European parliament's energy committee.

He adds: "Instead of discussing a new era in the energy sector, and a policy for real reductions in energy consumption by increasing energy efficiency, we are still mesmerised by our conflicts about nuclear energy ... which have replaced former ideological conflicts."

The German public is wary of phase-out, show new opinion polls: 38% think quitting nuclear energy would be "unreasonable", 29% are undecided and 23% in favour.

Sweden again postponing closure of Barsebäck-1?

November 30 is the day set by the Swedish government for the country's first closure of a nuclear power unit: Barsebäck-1, near the southern city of Malmö.

But closure may have to be delayed because:

- 1) the unit's electricity will be needed through the winter to help offset lower hydropower after a dry summer and autumn;
- 2) the European Commission is studying claims by owners Sydkraft that the government's political closure order breaks competition law;
- 3) Stockholm city court is considering Sydkraft's appeal that Barsebäck-1 should continue to operate until the European Commission gives its ruling.

Meanwhile, Barsebäck has signed a major fuel deal. Says its president, Per Lindell: "We have assumed that Barsebäck may continue to operate after November 30. We plan according to the principle of business as usual. If operation has to be stopped on November 30, we would use a force majeure clause in the (fuel enrichment) contract."

Parallel to all these moves, the government has reopened negotiations with Sydkraft about compensation for closure.

Operators of old Russian reactors now train on new Finn simulators

Russia's Kola nuclear power station now has for the first time a sophisticated simulator to train operators at the two oldest of its VVER-440 reactors.

The station – 200 km from Murmansk – has just started using the simulator gifted by neighbouring Finland.

Kola's plant analyser and the training simulator are based on the multifunctional process simulation software APRS, developed in Finland by Fortum Engineering Ltd and the Technical Research Centre of Finland.

The simulator will be upgraded in step with the ongoing modernisation of Kola nuclear power station.

East to close some reactors as price for admission to EU

Lithuania and Slovakia have announced moves towards closing power reactors as part of their negotiations to join the European Union.

The Lithuanian parliament is backing a government recommendation to close Ignalina-1 by year 2005 if Western countries help to finance its decommissioning. Decommissioning would cost about USD 2.5 billion, says energy minister Eugenijus Maldeikis.

The EU is planning an international donors conference before yearend in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

Meanwhile, the Slovak government has announced that it is to close Bohunice-1 and -2 early – in years 2006 and 2008, with EU financial aid for decommissioning.

The EU pressure for early closure is "political, not expert", comments deputy prime minister Pavol Hamzik.

The two 20-year-old Soviet-design reactors had recently been modernised: "extraordinarily successfully", according to an International Atomic Energy Agency safety conference this year.

The EU is also pressing Bulgaria to shut old reactors.

Bulgaria's nuclear station wins Green acclaim

Bulgaria's Kozloduy nuclear power station – a prime target for anti-nuclear activists internationally – has received an award for being environmentally friendly from the country's Green Party.

Presentation of the Party's newly launched ecology award recognises the 25-year-old power station's safety improvements and its role in curbing carbon dioxide emissions which would otherwise come from fossil-fuelled power plants.

Kozloduy has six Soviet-design reactors, producing about 40% of the nation's electricity.

Units 5 and 6 are going through a six-year modernisation, including installation of Western monitoring and computer systems. Units 1 to 4 have been upgraded, but will eventually close.

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