

Japan's Nuclear Nightmare Triggers Fears in France

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PARIS, Mar 17, 2011 (IPS) - Until the nuclear crisis started unfolding in Japan last week, most French citizens did not doubt that the country's 58 nuclear reactors were safe enough to continue operating for scores of years to come.

They ignored the evidence gathered by a handful of anti nuclear activists, who despite general public indifference, keep digging into the unfathomable intricacies of French energy bureaucracy to find out the truth about the frailty of the country's nuclear power plants.

But now, in the face of a looming nuclear catastrophe in Japan, even the most stoic French citizen would question whether this country is not living on the brink of a nuclear disaster.

Although no new representative opinion polls have been carried out since the first explosions were reported in the Fukushima power plant last weekend, some surveys by French news outlets suggest that a substantial number of respondents now favour a new energy policy with a reduced share of atomic power.

In fact the conservative French press, a loyal supporter of nuclear power, revealed Wednesday that last year alone more than 1,000 accidents of different intensity had happened in the country's atomic power plants.

The data is official, and is part of a report on nuclear safety in France, to be presented to the national parliament next month. The report, by the national Agency of Nuclear Safety, was supposed to remain confidential, until the Fukushima nuclear disaster occurred in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated the East Asian country.

France is the European country with the largest number of nuclear power plants in operation, and is the country most dependent on nuclear energy in the world. The country's 58 reactors in operation generate up to 80 percent of the electricity consumed in the country. The density of nuclear facilities in France is such that one is never more than 300 kilometres away from one of the atomic reactors.

For anti-nuclear activists, the high number of nuclear accidents was not a revelation. Long-time anti-nuclear activist Stéphane Lhomme, president of the Observatory of Nuclear Energy, told IPS that half of the nuclear power plants in operation in France are older than 25 years.

"Half of all the reactors are coming to the end of their operating lives, and are suffering the weakness caused by age," he told IPS.

Lhomme also said that numerous nuclear reactors suffer from design flaws that regularly lead to technical anomalies. "France has been very close to nuclear disaster several times in the last 10 years," he said.

The activist recalled that in December 1999, when winter storm Martin devastated France's southwest coast, the nuclear power plant of Blayais, near Bordeaux, was flooded by sea water, and

had to be shut down for several days. "We were very close to a catastrophe," he said.

And in May 1998, a crack in a pipe in the cooling system at the Civaux power plant caused a massive radioactive leak, which went uncontrolled for several hours. The plant was shut down for ten months.

Lhomme also pointed out that several French nuclear power plants are located in seismic zones. "The risk of an earthquake of the intensity of the last one in Japan is low in France," he said, "but our nuclear power plants are more fragile than their Japanese counterparts."

He added that France's oldest nuclear power plant in Fessenheim, near the border with Germany and Switzerland, "is located in a zone with high seismic activity and close to a river running higher than the plant's foundations. It has had numerous technical problems, mostly in its cooling systems." It had to be closed because some 50 cubic meters of a radioactive gas mixture leaked into the atmosphere.

Despite ample evidence of technical shortcomings in French nuclear plants, Lhomme considers it unlikely that France would phase out nuclear energy in the near future. "All political parties defend nuclear power, all are close one way or another to the French nuclear industrial complex and France has no alternative to nuclear power," he said.

It was not surprising therefore that the French government initially tried to play down the magnitude of the nuclear crisis in Japan. In a first reaction, French energy minister Eric Besson said the explosion in the Fukushima plant "was not a catastrophe." Later, he admitted that it "has become a nightmare."

Besson also said that "a debate on nuclear power in France is legitimate, but not indispensable. I continue to believe in the civil use of nuclear power," he said.

French opposition parties have called for a referendum on nuclear power. The Green party leadership suggested the phasing out of nuclear power within 25 years.

But Prime Minister François Fillon dismissed as "absurd" the conclusion, advanced by newspapers and environmental activists, that "nuclear power is condemned for good by the accident of Fukushima."

However, the government announced that it would control the safety of all nuclear power plants in operation.

Lhomme told IPS that the first measure France could launch to reduce its dependency on nuclear energy is to curb "our careless consumption of electricity. We could spare enormous amounts of energy if only we would better isolate homes and buildings, and stop heating them with electricity."

Some 80 percent of French households still use electric radiators for heating. "This is the consequence of a collusion between (the state-owned monopoly) Electricité de France and the construction and household equipment industry, which does not install gas or other heating systems in buildings," Lhomme said.

According to négaWatt, a French association of some 350 experts on energy and the environment, France could phase out nuclear power by 2035, based on a policy of energy efficiency to reduce superfluous consumption, and a massive programme for the use of renewable sources, especially wind and solar energy.

Thierry Salomon, director of négaWatt, told IPS, "By 2035, we could shut down all nuclear power plants, and rely on small-scale hydroelectric and geothermic generators, large parks of wind turbines and photovoltaic structures, and biomass units, and still generate enough electricity to meet the country's needs."

According to Salomon's scenario, France would by 2050 consume twice as much electricity as today, and could still do without nuclear power. "We would not go back to the use of candles," he said. "But we would not need nuclear power plants either." (END)

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* <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54879>