

French nuclear industry has repeated accidents

Olivier Laurent
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A major uranium leak at the Tricastin nuclear facility has focused attention on a series of recent incidents in France's nuclear industry, raising serious doubts about its safety precautions for its workers and the environment. The conflicting reports issued by state officials and representatives of France's public nuclear energy conglomerate, Areva, heighten suspicions of a cover-up.

In the night of July 7-8, the Tricastin nuclear site (in southeastern France's Drôme region) leaked 30 cubic meters of uranium-rich water. The spillage was partly on the grounds of the plant, which specialises in sanitizing and recycling low-radioactivity nuclear waste, and partly outside of the site. The High Commission for Transparency and Information on Nuclear Safety (HCTISN) concluded the incident and its handling revealed "a chain of malfunctions and human neglect" on the part of Socatri, the Areva subsidiary operating the plant.

In its statements on the incident, Socatri specified only the mass of uranium released—first it was reported that 360 kg were shed, then it was 224 kg of which, "only" 74 kg had been released outside the site—and the level at which the incident was classified on the International Atomic Energy Agency's International Nuclear Events Scale (INES). The incident was classified as level 1 on a scale of 0 ("simple deviation") to 7 ("major accident").

The INES classification by itself appears highly dubious: as soon as contamination occurs outside the nuclear site, the INES requires that the incident receive a minimum classification of level 3.

This information is not enough to assess the gravity of the incident: Socatri gave only the quantity of uranium shed, while the relevant measure is the level of radiation, expressed in Becquerels. This omission was clearly due to the wish to avoid panic: even if only 74 kg of natural, unenriched uranium has been shed the non-governmental organization CRIIRAD (Independent Commission of

Research and Information on Radioactivity) estimated that the radioactivity released would have been 1918 megabecquerels in one night—instead of the authorised 71.7 megabecquerels per year.

The official chronology is also unclear. The leak allegedly occurred on July 8 at 6.30 a.m.. The local representatives of the government were informed at 7.30 a.m. and the mayor of the nearest town (Lapalud) at 1.30 p.m., then the media at 4 p.m. But in an interview for the weekly *Journal du dimanche* on July 20, Areva CEO Anne Lauvergeon admitted "we should have warned the authorities as soon as 4.45 a.m.."

The inspection ordered by the Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN) was performed only on July 10, and the Socatri's CEO was subsequently fired.

State officials attempted to downplay the incident. The Minister of Ecology, Jean-Louis Borloo, noted there had been 86 level 1 "anomalies" in 2007 and 114 in 2006. This statement—hardly reassuring by itself—does not explain why an allegedly routine "anomaly" would justify the firing of the CEO.

A decree passed on July 23, 2003 and a law passed on June 13, 2006, restricting publicly available information on nuclear facilities in the name of the fight against terrorism, limit what can be revealed about the incidents. The measures classify information relative to stocking, protection, accountancy and transport of nuclear material as top secret. They also apply to the preparation of nuclear safety exercises.

The Tricastin site is a major part of the nuclear industry, with more than 5,000 employees and many sub-contracting companies. It includes the military research facility of Pierrelatte, the EDF (French Electricity, the public company operating the power plants) power plant, a factory for converting natural uranium (Comurhex), and a uranium enrichment factory (Eurodiff). The latter two are subsidiaries of Areva. Socatri is itself a sub-contractor

of Eurodiff.

CRIIRAD had already noted many malfunctions on the site. High radiation levels had been measured in 2002 in various places at Tricastin. More recently, it noted leaks on the waste pipes (April and August 2007) and on the retention tanks (October 2007) or on the waste-treatment station (November 2007). Also, in January, radioactive effluent was inadvertently left in a transfer tank. Above norms releases into the atmosphere were also noted in 2006. Areva has registered a request to increase maximum emission norms, which is still under discussion.

The enquiry on the July 7 incident also detected water table pollution, apparently linked to the storage of military nuclear waste at Pierrelatte. Due to the feelings provoked by the first incident, it was decided to test the water tables around all 58 French power plants. Citing the fact that that the initial Tricastin leak was at a fuel processing plant and not a power plant, Frederic Marillier, spokesman for nuclear questions at Greenpeace France, said in a July 17 press release: “this analysis must not stop at the nuclear plants but must be widened to all nuclear sites: to processing sites (such as Cadarache, Marcoule, or the Hague), to disused uranium mines (such as Bessines), to military sites (such as Valduc), and to waste-stocking centres, notably in the Manche region and at Soulaines.”

In the following weeks, there were other incidents, receiving less coverage: on July 11, at the Nogent-sur-Seine nuclear power plant; on July 12 at a plant at Gravelines; on July 18 at Saint-Albans-Saint-Maurice, and in the reactor at Tricastin on July 23. On July 17, another leak was detected at the FBFC factory at Romans-sur-Isère (also in the Drôme), caused by a pipe break dating back several years. In total, according to CRIIRAD figures quoted by the daily *Le Monde*, 126 workers were contaminated.

In a press release from July 25, CRIIRAD noted, “The repetition of incidents indicates a particularly worrying lack of any safety culture.”

In the July 19 edition of the *Journal du dimanche*, however, Lauvergeon baldly asserted that the handling of the incident was “the proof of a transparent industry.” She then declared, “the incident is over.” In a telephone interview for the Associated Press, Luis Echavarri, head of the Nuclear Energy Agency, declared, “You can’t expect perfection from any industry.” He called the Tricastin incident “negligible” and said there would be no negative impact on public opinion.

Underlying these cynical statements are powerful strategic interests of French capitalism. France’s nuclear

industry is among the most advanced in the world, providing nearly 80 percent of electric power in France, and Areva realized € 743 million in profits in 2007. As the recent incidents show, the drive for these profits led Areva to maintain lax safety standards and insufficient infrastructure investment.

Moreover, the massive price rises of fossil fuels and rising concern about greenhouse gas emissions are stimulating a renewed interest in nuclear energy worldwide, which French capitalism, led by President Nicolas Sarkozy, is seeking to exploit for commercial and geo-political advantage. Sarkozy has made selling nuclear power infrastructure an important element of many of his visits abroad. In this context, it is vital for French capitalism to maintain the illusion that France’s nuclear industry is perfectly trustworthy, especially as their advertising presents nuclear energy as rivaling solar and wind power in cleanliness.

Areva has long benefited from the low-priced uranium ore from Niger, a former French colony in West Africa. It also runs uranium mines in Canada, and has operations at 40 locations in the US.

On July 11, Areva was declared the preferred bidder for the Sellafield site in the UK, which is supposed to generate 1.6 billion euros annually. A nuclear energy deal was part of the €10 billion trade package negotiated between Sarkozy and Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in December 2007. Previously, Sarkozy negotiated a €8 billion sale of nuclear plants to China in November, and Areva obtained a €1 billion uranium enrichment contract in South Korea in June 2007.



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