

Deadly explosion hits French nuclear waste disposal plant

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An explosion at the Marcoule nuclear treatment plant in southern France at 11:45am on Monday killed one worker and injured four others, one seriously. The blast was caused by a fire near a furnace at the Centraco radioactive waste storage site. The materials being treated allegedly had a low level of radioactivity.

Interior ministry spokesman Pierre-Henry Brandet gave assurances that there had been no radiation leak inside or outside the plant, and officials said that it had been the blast that had killed the worker and not exposure to radioactive material.

However, as BBC environment correspondent Richard Black noted, “The French nuclear programme does not have a stellar record of transparency.” (See also, “French nuclear industry has repeated accidents”)

The Marcoule site is 55 years old. The Centraco treatment centre there produces MOX fuel which contains recycled plutonium from nuclear weapons. It has been in operation since January 1999.

Le Nouvel Observateur interviewed Thierry Charles, security director of the Institute of Radio-protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN). It wrote, “The causes [of the accident] have not yet been clearly identified. The furnace, a cylinder in which the metals are placed, is powered by electricity and is connected to a water cooling circuit. For it to explode there are two hypotheses: ‘Either the presence in the metals to be melted down of an incompatible substance,’ says Thierry Charles, ‘or a reaction between the molten metal and water in the event of a leak in the cooling circuit.’”

Corporations and government agencies suggested that

the risk to the public was minimal. A spokesperson for the owner of the site, EDF (the main French electricity utility), claimed that it as “an industrial accident, not a nuclear accident”.

In response to the Marcoule explosion, EDF’s share prices fell by more than 6 percent.

The Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN) admitted that low-level radioactive leaks were possible but ruled out airborne contamination. Staff have not been issued with iodine pills, and the authorities have placed no restrictions on access to the plant and its environs.

The CRIIRAD nuclear safety watchdog carried out tests at 4pm on Monday at the site, reporting that it had found no evidence of radioactive contamination.

Maryse Arditi, spokeswoman for the France Nature Environment association which monitors industrial risks, sounded a warning note in an interview with *20 Minutes*: “There could be radioactive fall-out, but considering the factory’s activities it should be low-level. But it all depends on what was being burned in the furnace at the time. ... We know that Centraco has already discharged tritium into the atmosphere and the corporate operator, Socodei, has already come to our attention in the past and was issued warnings by the ASN repeatedly for its lack of rigour.”

Ecology organisations have expressed scepticism towards the official reassurances. Greenpeace pointed out that Marcoule “is not taken into account either in the audit of nuclear installations or in the latest inspections carried out by the ASN.”

Particularly due to the on-going tragedy of the Japanese nuclear plant accident in Fukushima, the

viability of the nuclear power industry as a safe means of providing energy is being questioned.

According to *Le Monde*, “Stress tests were decided upon after the Fukushima accident in Japan, by the French government for the 58 plants in the national stock—as well as the EPR [European Pressurized Reactor] plant under construction in Flamanville—but also for the Areva [the nuclear construction firm] recycling factories and the research laboratories of the CEA (Atomic Energy Commission). In the framework of this audit, the ASN had the task of producing ‘initial conclusions’ by 2011. EDF, the historic operator of the French nuclear reactors should publish its reports by mid-September.”

Since the Fukushima disaster, Areva, which is developing the next generation of nuclear reactors, has been conducting a publicity campaign to reassure the public of the safety of nuclear energy.

Nuclear power provides 75 percent of France’s energy needs—the highest percentage of any country in the world. In contrast to Germany, Italy and Switzerland, who have pledged to reduce or phase out their use of nuclear power over the next few years, France announced in June that it was investing 1 billion euros in nuclear power, including funding for safety research.



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