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Friday, December 1, 2000

Exclusive - Extreme of Accident Severity Identified by Nuclear Expert's Report

Iberia news in the early part of September received from unknown sources a document which revealed the possibility of a possible "primary circuit coolant accident (LOCA) in the reactor compartment of a Royal Navy nuclear powered submarine when in the approaches to, manoeuvring within or berthed in the Dockyard basin".

The document which it states was commissioned by a school in Devonport was produced by John Large and Associates, one of the members of the Gibraltar Government panel of experts, and has been confirmed to be a valid document produced for Barne Barton School.

The contents of the document produces a series of questions over the emergency contingency plans at Devonport, and any other base using the same scheme such as Gibraltar in which operational submarines frequent, giving rise to questions brought about by an article on the Sunday Times and Guardian in the past two months.

Earlier this week a letter made public by the Ministry of Defence and written by the Rear Admiral Steven, Flag Officer Submarines corrects what it calls "inaccurate conclusions" drawn up in the Adam Nathan article in the Sunday Times, which gave reference to a possible meltdown on HMS Tireless when the initial incident occurred.

The letter states that, " contrary to the implicit criticism in Nathan's article, the coolant leak was promptly and efficiently dealt with by a very competent and well trained crew. Furthermore, the now well proven design, management and crew training in this sophisticated nuclear submarine is held in very high regard by operators, regulators and our allies throughout the world."

Further comments made by a Ministry of

Defence spokesman has also reiterated in the last few days that the Ministry of Defence believe that the contingency plans put into place are strict enough, and of a high enough level to deal with eventualities such the incident on HMS Tireless.

Although the Ministry of Defence claims have proven in this instance to be true and can be confirmed to be correct for the initial incident on HMS Tireless in the Mediterranean, since the fault was detected by the "leak before break system", the documents recently leaked to Iberia News, which were commissioned by a school in Devonport reveals very serious consequences in the case of a nuclear accident occurring. The document places serious questions over the risk to a population close to a nuclear submarine base which allows operational submarines to enter it's port.

The documents is based on an assessment of the emergency contingency plans if a "primary circuit coolant accident (LOCA) in the reactor compartment of a Royal Navy nuclear powered submarine when in the approaches to, manoeuvring within or berthed in the Dockyard basin" took place.

According to the document, which extensively covers all aspects of a nuclear incident depending on the severity of the loss of coolant and the position of the breach in the primary circuit, the incident from initiation to rupture of the hull containment and release of radioactivity to the atmosphere could be completed in several minutes. Such an incident has also been confirmed to be a possibility in an incident such as that which occurred on HMS Tireless whereby the sensitive monitoring systems fail to detect an increase in moisture within the compartment reactor and allows any possible cracks to reach a critical stage.

The document further indicates that in the extreme accident scenario it refers to, the effectiveness of sheltering and iodine prophylactic measures would be swamped by the magnitude of the problem and the only option would be to evacuate the areas exposed.

For such a scenario to occur the document states that both the reactor primary circuit and the fuel cladding system of the nuclear fuel within the reactor core must fail, permitting the radioactivity to spread into the submarine reactor compartment.

The secondary containment area would also have to be breached to enable the radioactive

gases and vapours to escape into the atmosphere. The secondary containment area is acknowledged to be robust enough, although evidence that damage by plant equipment has been known to provide for a radioactive release route. This is further reiterated by the Ministry of Defence who in comments made to Iberia News claim that "the system must be overridden several times before such an incident can occur." The spokesman further stated that there are enough safeguards to ensure this doesn't happen, and that the Ministry of Defence track record to proves the system works.

Nuclear experts have indicated that although the Ministry of defence is correct in it's comments it is ridiculous to assume that a flaw in the system or human error cannot be present at such a stage and could lead to the possible leaks reaching critical stage and hence the scenario described by the Sunday Times of a meltdown.

Using Chernobyl as an example the spokesman for the Ministry of Defence claims that before the final incident happened operators at Chernobyl had to override hundreds of safety systems something he claims they "would never do. Our system worked immediately and we didn't even have to go into contingency plans. Our crews are very well disciplined whilst on operational duty."

Yet the document produced by John Large and Associates makes several conclusions and comments which give reference to possible scenarios in which safety systems could be bypassed. Adding that under such an accident scenario UK contingency plans are not adequate enough since the deteriorating radiological situation could require evacuation within a short period of time.

With Gibraltar having been described as one of the major berthing ports for the British fleet, the document brings into question the level of risk Gibraltar is being exposed to whilst submarines entering Gibraltar are on operational duty.


It has also been revealed by official sources that although the Ministry of Defence feels it's crew is totally efficient, at least one member of the crew has been disciplined in the past few months due to a lack of care whilst on sentry duty.

known that equipment tools within the submarine could also cause a breach in the hull of the system and cause a possible accident scenario which could not be dealt with by the present emergency plans in operation.

Iberia News published an article in early September referring to this scenario and based on the contents of the report. The article in question places serious doubts over the validity of the emergency plans and confirms that nuclear experts in the UK are aware of problems relating to the military industry safety schemes.

Although the present state of HMS Tireless does not enter into this scenario due to the fact that the reactor is cold at present, the document places serious questions over the use of Gibraltar as a nuclear berthing point.

***Emergency Plan Found to Be Defective In UK -
(article first published september 2000)***

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