

REPORT ON EXERCISE SHORT SERMON 18 - 20 NOVEMBER 1997

The following is an account of the scenario which was played out during the exercise:

At 08.35 am on Tuesday 18th November there was a fire onboard the nuclear powered submarine, HMS Sovereign which was berthed at Faslane. At some time shortly after this the sirens sounded in the base and all personnel were told to go to their shelter positions.

The evacuation of the workforce took place between 12 noon and 2 pm. This was really carried out, but at a leisurely pace. Announcements over the tannoy made it clear that at this stage it was a "Category 2" accident, which means that there had been a release of radiation inside the submarine, but not into the atmosphere.

At 3 pm there was a release of radiation from the submarine into the atmosphere. This was a slow release which continued for hours afterwards.

The combination of gamma radiation coming from the hull and the release of radioactive dust into the atmosphere now meant that no-one could get near the submarine. Those involved in the exercise were discussing what they should do to try to bring the situation under control. The first solution was to fly over the submarine in a helicopter and drop bags full of water onto the reactor compartment. This was deemed to have failed. They decided they would need to try to get the submarine under the water. So the Navy proposed that they bring a warship alongside the submarine, fire high explosive shells at it, and sink it !! Apparently this is what then happened (only in the paper exercise - not for real).

We also heard that they decided that there would have to be a total restriction on all foodstuffs grown within 150 kilometres downwind (South) of the accident.

Dr John Reid the Armed Forces Minister visited the exercise headquarters on Wednesday afternoon.

Comments

The scenario of the exercise meant that they gave themselves at least six hours to prepare for a release of radiation into the atmosphere, which only occurred at 3 pm on Tuesday. In reality there could be a release within seconds or minutes. Potassium Iodate Tablets should be taken by the local people before they are exposed to radiation - they got round the dilemma of how to do this, by delaying the release of radiation.

The proposal to fire shells at the submarine was apparently greeted with horror by some of the civil nuclear industry people taking part in the exercise. This could well have caused the major disaster which they were trying to avoid. It also suggests that they were contemplating a full scale release of all the nuclear material from the reactor - which would be similar to the Chernobyl disaster and beyond what the emergency plans can cope with.

The exercise wind direction meant that the wind was blowing towards the emergency headquarters at Rhu. It is hard to imagine that in the real world the local authority representatives, journalists, and the Armed Forces Minister would all have travelled to this centre, only 3 miles downwind of the accident.

Only days before the exercise the Navy were dealing with a real accident. On or around Thursday 6th November radioactive coolant leaked from the reactor of HMS Turbulent at sea in the North Atlantic. 130 crew members had to be tested for radiation. The real attitude of the Navy was to tell no-one. The story only surfaced more than a week later in the local Plymouth papers. Meanwhile they now have the problem of what to do with HMS Turbulent which is at Devonport naval base in the middle of Plymouth.