

Scotsman 2/15/98

Nuclear emergency plan fails test

Strategy to protect public from radiation leak breaks
down in simulation exercise at Scottish submarine base

EUAN McCOLM

EMERGENCY plans to protect the public in the case of a nuclear accident are seriously flawed, a major Ministry of Defence exercise has revealed.

The report shows that in the event of a radiation leak from a nuclear submarine base, people could be denied the emergency medicines they would need.

The study follows a simulated disaster last year on a nuclear submarine in the Clyde.

In a secret post-operational document, the MoD has highlighted failings in the way life-saving anti-radiation medicines would be distributed. It raises serious concerns over the will-

ingness of key officials to become involved in essential work in the aftermath of an accident.

The Scottish National Party last night suggested emergency systems had collapsed during the exercise, co-ordinated by MoD staff at Faslane Naval Base.

John Ainslie, of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, said: "Even in a carefully orchestrated scenario, they got their knickers in a twist. Their procedures do not work."

In November last year, the exercise Short Sermon 97 simulated an accident on board a submarine.

The 72-hour operation,

which began with the scenario of the submarine leaking radiation and ended with a decision to sink it in the Gareloch in the Firth of Clyde, has thrown up a series of concerns.

Argyll and Clyde Health Board had major communication difficulties between staff at its headquarters and those at the accident scene.

The MoD has called for a review of the way potassium iodate tablets (PITs) - used to combat the effects of wind-borne radiation - should be distributed to the public.

In a 40-page secret report, all agencies involved give their views on the success of the exercise. The document reveals

that a decision taken by Argyll and Clyde Health Board on the geographical extent to which PITs should be distributed was not recorded. That led to chaos when agencies involved did not have details of the procedure.

Currently, PITs are stored at a central location ready for distribution. There were calls last night for the review of procedures to include moving the tablets to storage sites in secure boxes at schools, offices and pharmacies.

Argyll and Bute Council also reports that members of its staff had been unwilling to carry out the essential work expected of them, for fear of radiation contamination.

The document states: "A significant issue which we had not anticipated (but which would probably really happen) was the environmental health officers were very reluctant to undertake the type of response which we would normally expect of them. This raises a fundamental question as to the reality of available staff in such a situation."

Last night, the SNP's spokesman on defence, Colin Campbell, said: "The issue of the distribution of PITs is of great importance and the suggestion by the MoD that a review is needed is a cause of grave concern."

"The report certainly sug-

gests that whatever they were doing during the dry run collapsed.

"It would make sense for PITs to be stored at a number of places in the community which would make them easier for the public to access in an emergency. Schools and offices could have them in locked boxes, and local pharmacies could carry emergency supplies."

The writer of the report, Andy Moore, assistant director for nuclear accident response at the Ministry of Defence, said: "There will be a look, again, at the guidelines issued to directors of public health on the way they should go about the distribution of tablets."

Nuclear exercise ^{2c} was successful 7/5/98

Sir, - It is not my custom to respond to newspaper reports; however, your report on the exercise Short Sermon, ("Nuclear emergency plan fails test", 2 May), contains a number of errors and misrepresents by a wide margin the outcome of a successful exercise.

No objective reader of the report could conclude, as your headline does, that the plans and arrangements in place failed the test posed by the exercise. All agencies were of the view that their plans were satisfactory, and that the exercise had been a particularly demanding one.

As one might well expect, all agencies were also able to identify areas where improvements can be made to make the plans work even better; this, after all, is part of the purpose of conducting exercises.

Secondly, the report referred to was not secret. Your journalist has obtained a copy of the all agency post-exercise report; far from being secret, as he claims, the report was published recently and placed in the House of Commons library. I also sent copies to MPs local to the Clyde naval base.

When we honour our commitment to open government, it is disingenuous of the media to imply that we are keeping secret that which we clearly are not.

Finally, the report was not written by the Ministry of Defence. All the major agencies who participated in the exercise have contributed: the Ministry of Defence provided but one of some dozen contributions.

We also wrote the preface, which records the agreement of all the agencies on the actions that now need to be carried out. This is an excellent example of a wide range of public sector bodies co-operating for the public benefit.

I recognise that the public is concerned about nuclear issues and the possibility of accidents, however unlikely. We go to considerable lengths to make our systems safe, but we also take a responsible attitude towards preparing for emergencies.

We carry out these exercises precisely in order constantly to improve our safety and security. We publish our reports precisely in order to defuse suspicions of secrecy. What a pity this was not acknowledged.

(Dr) John Reid
MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE
ARMED FORCES
WHITEHALL, LONDON

Sc 11/5/98 Nuclear accident exercise questions

Sir, - One of the major aims of the Short Sermon nuclear accident exercise carried out at Faslane last year was to test whether the public could effectively be protected from the health hazards expected from such a disaster. Having read the multi-agency report on the exercise, I am not assured this aim was (or ever could be) realistically met. The section written by Argyll and Clyde Health Board leaves particular cause for concern:

- 1, It admitted the decision of how far to extend distribution of Potassium Iodate tablets (PITS), and give advice on taking shelter, was not recorded; so different agencies worked with different figures!
- 2, The distribution of PITS was only carried out on paper. The report gives no estimate of how many households were theoretically visited, and in what time-span. But the fact that it is now reviewing the distribution mechanism suggests it has recognised that people living in the vicinity of a nuclear facility should hold their own supplies of tablets, with clear instructions on their use (as at the Naval base at Devonport)
- 3, The board's 0800 helpline dealt with 25 theoretical calls from those given tablets. This in no way tests its ability to cope with the huge number of calls it would get from people living in this area who are constantly kept in the dark about the consequences of a serious accident at Faslane.

Jane Tallents

JOHN STREET, HELENSBURGH
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Sir, - The armed forces minister, John Reid, suggests (Letters, 7 May) that the veil has now been lifted from one of the most closely guarded secrets of the British military establishment, the safety of the reactors that power nuclear submarines. Would it were so!

The report on the Short Sermon exercise which is in the public domain, is not the full Ministry of Defence report. Experience shows that there will be another report which goes into far more details, but it will be classified and kept hidden from ordinary mortals.

The published report does not reveal how much radiation would have been dispersed into the atmosphere, or which parts of Scotland would have been contaminated by an accident at Faslane.

Had this been a civil nuclear exercise, these details would have been disclosed, along with maps showing radiation plumes crossing the country. So long as the MoD continues to hide the grim realities from the Scottish people, it is only right and proper that they remain suspicious about the floating Chernobyls moored on the Gareloch.

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