

The nuclear nightmare on our doorstep

THE MOX nuclear fuel plant will start operations in three weeks despite official fears of a terrorist attack or accident with catastrophic consequences for Ireland.

No amount of spinning over legal points will lessen the worry felt by everyone on this island.

From next year armed ships will be cruising up and down the Irish Sea - less than 30 miles from our coast - carrying deadly cargoes of nuclear waste from Germany and Japan exposing this country to the possible consequences of terrorist attack.

For years successive Governments have been accused of lacking the moral and political courage to take on Britain despite the serious health concerns in Co Louth, radioactive contamination of Irish sea catches and revelations about falsified safety data.

Relations between the Irish and British governments now remain seriously at odds over Sellafield with charges that the UK authorities have been less than honest in their dealings over the matter and have deliberately withheld vital information.

The UN Tribunal for the Law of the Sea has rejected what appeared to be overwhelming evidence and arguments from Ireland as to why there should be an injunction on the MOX plant going ahead pending the outcome of a full hearing.

Ireland argued MOX would be an attractive terrorist target and would increase the radioactive pollution of the Irish Sea, the most radioactive ocean in the world.

In fact a direct aircraft attack on Sellafield could release 50 times more radioactivity than Chernobyl leading to 3m cancers affecting many people on this side of the water.

Assurances about the effects of Sellafield radiation on the Irish public were also called into question following the publication of a new study showing that low doses of radiation may be far more harmful than anyone has realised.

US scientists have shown that the method used to judge the risk of genetic damage by radiation, based on what happened to survivors of the A-bomb drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 is seriously flawed.

Current radiation risk assessments only take into account the direct effect of radiation on DNA in the cell nucleus.

Using this yardstick the smaller the number of cells exposed to radiation the less risk there is of genetic mutations occurring. Experts relying on the principle have assumed that although high radiation doses can be dangerous, the risk from low level exposure is minimal. But they might have to think again in light of the new findings published yesterday in the US journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

It also means processing hundreds of tonnes of plutonium capable of producing thousands of cancers in this country if the plant blew up through terrorist endeavour or human error, both scenarios which are now viewed as very possible.

Nuclear weapons specialists have expressed concern that starting up the MOX plant will make it virtually inevitable that terrorists will acquire the plutonium they want by separating it out from the mixed fuel and making bombs.

One went so far as to say this was not technically difficult. The MOX (mixed oxide fuel) plant was built to accept spent plutonium and uranium from nuclear plants around the world and turn it into reusable fuel which is then transported by ship to places such as Japan, exposing a risk of hijack. But it will never make money.


Against a background of growing worry over a possible terrorist attack on Sellafield or other nuclear installations or more likely an accident with far-reaching consequences the last thing this country needed was Sellafield Mark II, effectively making the plant the dumping ground for the entire world's nuclear waste.

Furthermore, up to two tonnes of caesium-137 would be released into the atmosphere if the plant was struck by a hijacked plane or if bungling led to an accident.

This is a lot more than the 50lb released by the Chernobyl disaster. And in Belarus after Chernobyl there was an 800pc increase in thyroid disorders, cancers soared, deformed babies were born and immune systems were weakened. There is a ray of hope. Ireland may have lost the short-term battle to halt the start of operations at the MOX plant, but yesterday's judgment could yet mark the point where the Government started winning the war over Sellafield. Although the international court flatly rejected the requested injunction, it did so not because it felt Ireland had no case, but because the timing didn't justify the measure.

The Court accepted Britain's arguments that nuclear fuel will not be transported from the MOX plant until next October at the earliest and perhaps more importantly rejected Ireland's claim that the process of commissioning the MOX plant on or around December 20th was not reversible. Since no shipments will move on the Irish Sea for

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nearly a year and as Britain has given assurance that opening up plutonium canisters later this month will not make the complex process irreversible, Britain won more time.

However on two very substantive points of law, the court clearly found in favour of Ireland.

These arguments may not prevent the start of new operations at MOX later this month, but they could encourage further legal assaults from Ireland, other countries, or environmental groups like Greenpeace. In the meantime, the Irish people will have to live with a new nuclear threat.

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