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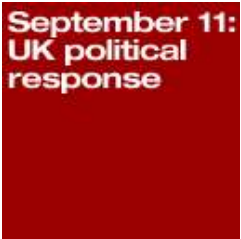
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Staff and agencies
Thursday March 7, 2002

A Conservative spokesman was accused of "irresponsible" behaviour in the Commons today after he revealed just how easy it would be for terrorists to destroy Sellafield nuclear power plant and render most of Britain uninhabitable.

Tory environment spokesman Jonathan Sayeed called for stricter security to prevent a possible air strike on the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, after spelling out the consequences of a hijacked airplane crashing into the nuclear reactor.

But environment minister Michael Meacher turned on Mr Sayeed during question time, claiming it was extraordinary for a frontbench MP to draw attention to the "exposure of a major nuclear plant" in public.

The row was sparked when Mr Sayeed said the amount of highly radioactive material stored at Cumbrian plant "in steel tanks nearly 50 years old" was around 100 times the quantity released in the Chernobyl disaster.

"Will you confirm that a passenger jet would take about 30 seconds to traverse the air exclusion zone around Sellafield and hit those tanks.

"Do you agree that, dependent on weather conditions, this would render all land within 400 miles of Sellafield, uninhabitable.

"There's an urgent need for the imposition of new security measures, perhaps involving precautions as basic as barrage balloons, to deal with this threat until safer storage of fissile material is achieved," he said.

Mr Meacher responded: "I find it absolutely extraordinary that a frontbench spokesman, on behalf of the opposition - even if what he said was correct, and I certainly don't confirm it - to advertise in parliament and draw attention to the exposure of a major nuclear plant in this way is pretty irresponsible.

These matters had received "intense examination" since September 11.

"It is not my place to say publicly here in parliament exactly what are the precautionary measures that have been put in place.

"I would expect these measures to be handled through the usual consultative channels and not openly broadcast in this way."

The government was "acutely aware of the problem" and doing everything it could to deal with it.

Earlier, Labour's David Chaytor also raised the vulnerability of Sellafield to attack.

Mr Chaytor asked whether the government's chief scientific adviser would have issued his statement this morning calling for Britain to build new nuclear power stations "had the hijacked aeroplane flown into Sellafield and not the World Trade Centre".

Mr Meacher told him: "Obviously after September 11 the exposure of nuclear plants is a major issue.

"This is now kept very firmly under review by the office of civil nuclear safety and security measures have been tightened in the light of that event."

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