Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1311 (1997)[1]

Safety of nuclear installations in the countries of central and eastern Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly, conscious of the complexity of the problems raised by the presence of several potentially dangerous nuclear power plants in some countries of central and eastern Europe, has on severl occasions expressed its concern about nuclear safety in these countries.

2. Recommendation 1209 (1993) on nuclear power plants in central and eastern Europe was a document ahead of its time. It put forward politically realistic and economically viable solutions, ranging from operating improvements and reactor modernisation to the immediate shutdown of the most dangerous reactors.

3. Unfortunately, the alarm bells which the Assembly rang have not had the desired effect. By way of illustration, it took almost three years for the official decision to close the Chernobyl plant to be taken in December 1995. It will be the year 2000 before that decision is put into effect.

4. In parallel, the Assembly has addressed the issue of nuclear safety in the countries of central and eastern Europe through Resolution 1087 (1996) on the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster and Resolution 1094 (1996) on the activities of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (ebrd) in 1995, which sought, inter alia, to strengthen the role played by the ebrd in this field, through its Nuclear Safety Account.

5. Even though the operation of one or more nuclear plants may be an integral part of the energy policy adopted by a state and is a matter for the sovereignty of the state in question, the particular features of the production of nuclear energy entitle and indeed oblige the international community to express its concerns over the practical arrangements for such production. In effect, the lack of nuclear safety resulting either from reactor design faults or from uncertainties relating to the human factor must be of concern not only to one or two states but to the whole continent. The consequences of a possible accident are not limited to one country alone. This was illustrated only too clearly by the Chernobyl disaster over a decade ago.

6. The Council of Europe, as a pan-European institution, is suitably placed to be able to take effective action to improve nuclear safety throughout Europe. The Assembly is currently addressing the issue of nuclear safety only in the countries of central and eastern Europe, simply because several reactors in these countries, especially the first generation rbmk-type reactors, have many design faults and because the safety culture in each of these countries can and must be radically improved.

7. A series of high-level initiatives has been taken in recent times in order to set up an international nuclear safety control mechanism. The Convention on Nuclear Safety, negotiated under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (iaea), codifies the basic safety principles relating to the regulation, management and operation of nuclear installations and the need to establish and maintain a legislative and regulatory framework. The Memorandum of Understanding, signed in 1995 by the G7, the European Commission and Ukraine, provides for the closure of the Chernobyl plant by the year 2000. The Summit on Nuclear Safety and Security held in Moscow in April 1996 emphasised the safety-first principle, whereby safety must prevail over all other considerations in the field of nuclear energy.

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1. Assembly debate on 28 January 1997 (3rd Sitting) (see Doc. 7714, report by the Committee on Science and Technology, rapporteur: Mr Birraux). Text adopted by the Assembly on 28 January 1997 (3rd Sitting).

8. A number of financial initiatives have been taken to help improve nuclear safety in the countries of central and eastern Europe. The European Commission has earmarked funds under its Phare and Tacis programmes. At the request of the G7, the ebrd set up the Nuclear Safety Account in 1993 to subsidise specific projects to improve the operational and technical safety of nuclear plants. The account is financed by voluntary contributions from donor countries but it does not have sufficient funds.

9. In the light of the above, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe invite the governments of all member states to pursue and step up international co-operation to improve nuclear safety in the countries of central and eastern Europe by taking, inter alia, the following measures:

9.1. promote the inculcation of a safety culture in all countries which have chosen nuclear energy as an integral part of their national energy system. To this end, twinnings between power plants in western Europe and those in central and eastern Europe should be encouraged, having due regard to the positive results of similar initiatives already undertaken. Staff in central and east European plants should have the opportunity to improve their skills on the simulators available in western training centres;

9.2. make every effort to ensure that the Convention on Nuclear Safety is ratified and implemented by all countries with nuclear power plants;

9.3. establish greater international transparency in the whole spectrum of activities relating to nuclear energy. Accordingly, inspections of various nuclear sites by the authorities of countries other than the host country should be encouraged. The international community must be made aware of and be able to analyse any incidents or accidents which might occur, in order to ensure that they can be prevented in a general way in the future;

9.4. help to strengthen safety authorities and their technical safety organisations (tsos) in the countries of central and eastern Europe, by continuing and increasing the technical assistance and research programmes run by western tsos in the field of safety. Among the aims of these ongoing programmes for the transfer of specific skills and methods are improved safety assessment capabilities and authorisation and inspection procedures;

9.5. substantially increase voluntary contributions to the ebrd's Nuclear Safety Account in order for a greater number of specific projects to be subsidised through the Bank;

9.6. further to the numerous safety assessment studies already carried out, decide in a precise and co-ordinated way which reactors in the countries of central and eastern Europe should be shut down and what alternative sources of energy are to be employed so that the countries concerned are not faced with energy shortages;

9.7. support the drawing up, by the competent national and international organisations, of reaction and assistance plans in the event of accidents in nuclear power plants. In this context, the project devised by the Division of Environmental Information and Assessment (deia) of the United Nations Environment Programme (unep) in conjunction with the iaea should be encouraged. Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to nuclear accidents in the framework of the Council of Europe's "eur-opa Major Hazards" Open Partial Agreement on the prevention of, protection against, and organisation of relief in major natural and technological disasters;

9.8. ensure that the necessary funds are available to continue and step up public nuclear safety research programmes;

9.9. ensure that the provision of financial and technical assistance is geared towards restructuring the energy supply in the states of central and eastern Europe in an environmentally protective and sustainable manner. Such assistance must not be limited to the aspect of reactor safety but increasingly utilise the existing potential for saving energy and support the widespread use of risk-free and alternative energy sources;

9.10. adopt solutions which are reliable, secure, technologically feasible, socially acceptable and transparent, in order to manage nuclear waste in the short, long and very long term;

9.11. encourage the setting up of associations of safety authorities, safety research centres and nuclear waste management companies. As is the case with wano (World Association of Nuclear Operators) for the operators, these associations will be able to share their experience in a specific framework, possibly receiving financial support from the European Union and the EBRD

10. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite the governments of the countries of central and eastern Europe which have nuclear power plants to take the following measures:

10.1. improve the national legal framework in the field of nuclear safety, having due regard to international standards as defined in the Convention on Nuclear Safety and in the Paris and Vienna conventions on third party/civil liability in the event of nuclear accidents;

10.2. grant safety authorities genuine independence and, at the same time, strong and loyal support such that they can derive real benefit from that independence;

10.3. immediately take inexpensive but effective steps to improve the safety culture, such as:

a. amending any nuclear plant operating rules which do not conform to the principle whereby safety prevails over all other considerations. Any sign of reactor malfunction must prompt an appropriate response from the operators. They must place safety above all else, ahead of the economic or occupational implications of the possible halting of the reactor;

b. organising, at national level, further training courses for power plant staff;

10.4. guarantee staff at power plants and storage centres medical supervision and high-level radiological protection;

10.5. reaffirm their commitment to honour their political undertakings and the schedules laid down by the international political or economic authorities for the implementation of those undertakings, and include safety conditions in each assistance or co-operation programme in the nuclear sector;

10.6. ensure that any new reactor under construction is, from the moment it becomes operational, equipped with the necessary safety systems to meet the iaea standards in force

11. The Assembly asks the Committee of Ministers to forward this recommendation to the governments of the states concerned which are not members of the Council of Europe and to the relevant international organisations and to appeal to them to step up their efforts to find quick and viable solutions which will guarantee a uniform level of nuclear safety throughout Europe.

12. The Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to inform all the international bodies concerned, in particular the G7, of the content of this recommendation, so that practical action is taken, and to make periodical assessments of the various actions taken with a view to improving nuclear safety.