

FF112

B-WIRE

09-JUN-86 15:39

E/W -- CHERNOBYL REDUCES NUCLEAR POWER TO STATUS OF NECESSARY EVIL

BONN, JUNE 9, REUTER - WOULD YOU LIVE NEXT DOOR TO A NUCLEAR REACTOR?

SIX WEEKS AFTER THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER, THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE IN THE WEST ARE ANSWERING "NO", POSING GRAVE PROBLEMS FOR THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY AND MOST GOVERNMENTS COMMITTED TO ATOMIC POWER.

IN THE UNITED STATES, BRITAIN, WEST GERMANY AND THE NETHERLANDS, OPINION POLLS SHOW THE INDUSTRY'S LONG BATTLE FOR PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE MAY BE LOST, WITH MAJORITIES OF 60 TO 70 PER CENT SAYING NUCLEAR POWER IS INHERENTLY TOO DANGEROUS.

BUT A REUTER SURVEY OF NUCLEAR-POWER STATES SHOWS THAT OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO CHERNOBYL MAY ULTIMATELY BE CONDITIONED BY THE SCALE OF ECONOMIC INVESTMENT IN THE ATOM RATHER THAN THE PUBLIC TRAUMA CAUSED BY THE APRIL 26 SOVIET CATASTROPHE.

FRANCE, WHICH DEPENDS ON 45 REACTORS FOR 60 PER CENT OF ITS ENERGY, IS PRESSING ON WITH ITS AMBITIOUS NUCLEAR EXPANSION PLANS THOUGH, LIKE BRITAIN, IT HAS PLEDGED TO BE MORE OPEN ABOUT ACCIDENTS AND SAFETY ISSUES.

THE DUTCH, WITH ONLY SIX PER CENT OF ELECTRICITY FROM REACTORS, DECIDED TO SHELVE THEIR FIVE-FOLD EXPANSION PLAN INDEFINITELY AND IN THE U.S. THE ALREADY DEEPLY TROUBLED INDUSTRY HAS BEEN THROWN INTO A TAILSPIN.

THE STRONG WEST GERMAN ANTI-NUCLEAR MOVEMENT HAS STAGED MASSIVE POST-CHERNOBYL PROTESTS, FORCING THE HASTY APPOINTMENT OF THE COUNTRY'S FIRST MINISTER WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR REACTOR SAFETY, AND CASTING DOUBT ON FUTURE REACTOR PLANS.

IN NEIGHBOURING AUSTRIA, WHICH REJECTED ATOMIC POWER IN A 1979 REFERENDUM, A FIERCE ANTI-NUCLEAR MOOD IS STIFFENING WEST GERMANS IN THEIR RESISTANCE TO BAVARIA'S NUCLEAR PLANS.

BUT IN NEWLY INDUSTRIALISED "THRESHOLD ECONOMY" COUNTRIES SUCH AS TURKEY AND ARGENTINA, CHERNOBYL WAS WAVED ASIDE BY GOVERNMENTS DETERMINED TO HARNESS NUCLEAR POWER.

THE SOVIET UNION, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, BULGARIA, HUNGARY AND ROMANIA, WITH VIRTUALLY NO PUBLIC RESISTANCE TO COPE WITH, ALSO PLAN TO CONTINUE RESOLUTELY DOWN THE NUCLEAR ROAD.

YET THE FEARS RAISED BY CHERNOBYL AND THE CONFIRMATION THAT EVEN "OPEN" GOVERNMENTS PREFER TO DRAW A VEIL OVER NUCLEAR RISKS HAVE CONFERRED "NECESSARY EVIL" STATUS ON WHAT WAS ONCE BILLED AS THE CLEAN, CHEAP ENERGY OF THE FUTURE.

ACCORDING TO A BRITISH REPORT LAST WEEK, EUROPEAN ORDERS FOR NEW POWER STATIONS OUTSIDE FRANCE ARE LIKELY TO COME TO A DEAD STOP, DUE TO RISING CONSTRUCTION COSTS, COMPETITION FROM CHEAP OIL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL OBSTACLES.

THE REPORT SAID POST-CHERNOBYL PRESSURE FOR EVEN GREATER SAFETY PRECAUTIONS COULD SIMPLY PRICE REACTORS OUT OF THE MARKET ON PURE ECONOMIC GROUNDS.

IN MOST WESTERN INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES, THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY'S IMMEDIATE, DEFENSIVE RESPONSE TO CHERNOBYL WAS: "IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE. OUR SAFETY PRECAUTIONS ARE TOO GREAT."

IN CANADA, WHICH HAS INVESTED HEAVILY IN THE CANDU REACTOR AS A MAJOR EXPORT PRODUCT, NORM ASPIN OF THE CANADIAN NUCLEAR ASSOCIATION REPEATED THIS VIEW.

"THE PUBLIC IS MUCH BETTER PROTECTED BY THE DESIGN OF OUR REACTORS," HE SAID, ECHOING WEST GERMANY'S OFFICIAL REACTION.

"ONCE WE CAN CONVINCE PEOPLE OF THAT, I DON'T THINK THERE WILL BE ANY PRESSURE TO SHUT OUR REACTORS DOWN," ASPIN ADDED. (PTO)

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BUT CONVINCING PEOPLE HAS BEEN ONE OF THE INDUSTRY'S MAJOR GOALS ALMOST SINCE ITS INCEPTION AND, A GENERATION LATER, THE UNEASE ABOUT ATOMIC POWER APPEARS UNDIMINISHED.

IN THE UNITED STATES, NO NEW NUCLEAR PLANTS HAVE BEEN ORDERED SINCE THE LATE 1970S WHEN THE THREE MILE ISLAND RADIATION LEAK DEALT THE FIRST MAJOR BLOW TO NUCLEAR CREDIBILITY, AND ALL THOSE ORDERED BETWEEN 1974 AND 1978 HAVE BEEN CANCELLED.

IN AFFLUENT COUNTRIES, THE GROWING POLITICAL BURDEN OF NUCLEAR POWER PLUS THE ARGUMENT THAT NON-NUCLEAR ELECTRICITY COULD BE JUST AS CHEAP ARE SWAYING GOVERNMENT PLANNERS.

WEST GERMAN CHANCELLOR HELMUT KOHL HAS SAID HIS COUNTRY CANNOT AFFORD TO SIMPLY SWITCH OFF ITS 19 REACTORS, BUT IN THE LONG TERM IT MUST REDUCE THEIR IMPORTANCE AND INVEST MORE IN ALTERNATIVE ENERGY RESEARCH SUCH AS SOLAR POWER.

RADIATION LEVELS IN COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY THE NUCLEAR CLOUD FROM CHERNOBYL HAVE NOW RETURNED TO NEAR NORMAL IN THE WEST AND CONSUMERS ARE AGAIN BUYING FRESH VEGETABLES AND MILK.

THE WEST GERMAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION SAID IN A STATEMENT TODAY THAT NO ONE HAD SUFFERED FROM THE FALLOUT.

BUT IT ADDED THAT THE LASTING SHOCK OF CHERNOBYL LIES IN THE REALISATION THAT MANY COULD HAVE SUFFERED, THAT VITAL INFORMATION WAS MISSING OR GROSSLY DELAYED, THAT EMERGENCY PROCEDURES ON AN INTERNATIONAL SCALE WERE WOEFULLY INADEQUATE.

THE PEOPLE, WITHOUT WARNING AND AWASH IN AN ALPHABET SOUP OF NANOCURIES, BEQUERELS, REMS AND MILLIREMS, WERE OFTEN BEWILDERED BY SCIENTISTS' EFFORTS TO REASSURE THEM.

IN SWITZERLAND, WHERE NEARLY NINE OUT OF TEN HAVE A FALLOUT SHELTER BUILT TO WITHSTAND A NUCLEAR WAR, CHERNOBYL EVEN PUT THAT UNPARALLELED SYSTEM'S EFFECTIVENESS IN QUESTION.

AS KOHL STRESSED, CHERNOBYL SHOWED THAT ONE COUNTRY'S ABANDONMENT OF NUCLEAR POWER SOLVES NOTHING IF ITS NEIGHBOURS, ESPECIALLY IN CROWDED EUROPE, KEEP THEIR REACTORS BURNING.

THAT FACT IS LIKELY TO ENSURE THAT EXISTING REACTORS ARE NOT SWITCHED OFF BECAUSE OF CHERNOBYL.

BUT DESPITE PROMISES OF HIGHER SAFETY STANDARDS, ACCORDS ON TIMELY WARNINGS, BETTER EVACUATION PLANS AND GREATER OFFICIAL OPENNESS, THE INDUSTRY'S LONG BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS MAY HAVE SUFFERED AN IRREVOCABLE SETBACK.

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