

Is the SA public in the dark about Koeberg?

The recent revelations by Public Enterprises Minister Pravin Gordhan that three separate safety incidents had occurred at Koeberg Power Station in 2014 and 2015 should raise red flags for South African citizens. Not only is the executive decision to keep the public in the dark about these incidents problematic, but possible safety issues contradict the SA government's assertion that nuclear energy is safe, clean and a solution to climate change.



Koeberg nuclear power station

“When something happens at Koeberg, the National Nuclear Regulator (NNR) decides whether it should be classed as an incident or not. If it is an incident, they need to report on this and the public would be better informed. But, if they deem it to be less than an incident, then they do not need to report on it, and since the public is none the wiser, there would be no public outcry. The question is, how does the NNR decide what to report on and what to omit? And, shouldn't citizens have some say in what the NNR is obliged to share with them?” Peter Becker, from Koeberg Alert Alliance says.

“While the NNR's 2014 Annual Report does mention “minor occurrences”, the 2015 report stated that there were no nuclear incidents reported during that period. Why then does Minister Gordhan say that there were indeed incidents at Koeberg? Either the minister needs to clarify his language, or the NNR is deceiving us. Furthermore, it is imperative that the public is made aware of any and every problematic event at Koeberg, so that we have a more realistic picture of what is happening at the power plant.”

Current plan inadequate

South Africa should take note and learn from what happened at Fukushima eight years ago. As a result of a tsunami in 2011, while trying to contain the radiation from the damaged plant, human error turned this event into a major incident with uncontained radiation spreading right across the Pacific ocean to this day. An independent investigation found that the catastrophe that followed was ultimately “the result of collusion between the government, the regulators” and the nuclear industry, says Vainola Makan, Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (Safcei) energy justice coordinator.

“It is very concerning that, in the case of an accident at Koeberg, Eskom is required to act. If we consider the revelations of mismanagement and corruption at Eskom, a state-owned enterprise (SOE), can we honestly expect citizens – who are still suffering as a result of the widespread unethical governance of the corrupt Zuma-era – to rely on Eskom to secure our safety in the case of an emergency?” she says.

“The people living around the nuclear plant in Fukushima were also told not to worry and that the plant was absolutely safe, but the disaster happened and many of them are still displaced, and suffering illnesses, as a result of their exposure to unsafe radiation levels. We cannot keep denying that there are serious and far-reaching risks associated with nuclear energy. It is therefore, important that citizens are made aware of any and all risks.

“The current plans are completely inadequate, as the reference to leakage and spillage is reactive instead of preventative, and only focuses on dealing with downwind air pollution up to a 16km radius, with no mention of possible spillages into the Atlantic Ocean or leaks into the ground. We need a comprehensive transport plan to ensure that people at risk can be transported out of the vicinity when an emergency leak happens. This should include safety measures to protect those responsible for transportation as well,” concludes Makan.

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