



Fruits of fear. France didn't take precautionary measures, such as banning consumption of fresh produce, after the Chernobyl disaster.

FRANCE

Twenty Years After Chernobyl, Legal Fallout Lingers

PARIS—Memories of Chernobyl have begun to fade in most Western European countries. But not in France, where debate still rages about the government's response to the 1986 nuclear reactor explosion in Ukraine that spread radioactive material over much of Europe. The debate reached a new pitch last week, when a judge opened a preliminary investigation against the now 82-year-old former head of a nuclear safety watchdog, who stands accused of covering up the true extent of the fallout 20 years ago.

Pierre Pellerin was director of the Central Service for Protection Against Ionizing Radiation (SCPRI) at the time. In reassuring statements issued after the disaster, SCPRI asserted that radiation had not reached dangerous levels anywhere in France. Accordingly, the French government did not adopt precautionary measures—such as banning the consumption of fresh milk, fruits, or vegetables from affected regions—implemented by neighboring countries.

Civil parties in the case against Pellerin—some 500 thyroid patients, their national association, and a group called the Commission for Independent Research and Information on Radioactivity (CRIIRAD)—charged in 2001 that Pellerin understated the risks to prevent a public backlash against nuclear energy, which provides nearly 80% of France's electricity. The result, they claim, is an increase in thyroid cancer cases, in particular in eastern France and the island of Corsica, the regions hardest hit by fallout. Other experts say there's no such effect.

An unpublished expert study conducted at the judge's request by physician Paul Genty and veterinarian and food-safety expert Gilbert Mouthon, based in part on documents seized from SCPRI, concluded that SCPRI's information at the time was “neither complete nor precise,” according to press reports. By making public average radiation measurements for France's 95 departments, the agency obscured much higher values in local hot spots, the two scientists are reported to have written.

Based on the study, the judge has charged Pellerin with “aggravated deceit.” Pellerin has denied any wrongdoing. Although the case may never go to trial, the investigation “should finally bring some clarity,” says Marcel Boiteux, a former head of France's national power company EDF, who believes at worst Pellerin may have tried to avoid panic. Boiteux, along with physicist Nobel laureate Georges Charpak and some 60 others, wrote an open letter to President Jacques Chirac in June 2005 condemning the “odious attacks” on Pellerin, whom they called “a great servant of the state.”

Even if SCPRI painted too rosy a picture, Chernobyl's potential effects on French health are hard to determine. It is well known that radioactive iodine-131 accumulates in the thyroid and can cause cancer, especially in children. And thyroid cancer is on the rise in France. But studies have shown that the rise began in 1975 or earlier, there was no upturn after 1986, and countries not affected by Chernobyl fallout have seen increases too. However, CRIIRAD president Roland Desbordes maintains that an epidemiological study ordered by the judge among people in Corsica who were under 15 in 1986—and so most vulnerable to iodine-131—will demonstrate a “Chernobyl effect.”

According to a U.N. study of Chernobyl's legacy published last year (*Science*, 14 April, p. 180), some 4000 children and adolescents in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia did develop thyroid cancer, but it is curable in 99% of cases. An increase in France would be unexpected, says Shunichi Yamashita, a radiation expert at the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. “There is no ‘Chernobyl effect’ in France,” a group of 50 doctors and scientists wrote in an open letter to thyroid patients published in December in national newspaper *Libération*. The problem, the group said, is that French patients have become “hostages to an antinuclear and legal-medical lobby.”

—MARTIN ENSERINK

Senate Probes CDC Shuffle

A U.S. Senate panel wants to know whether a reorganization at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, is driving senior scientists away. Senate Finance Committee Chair Charles Grassley (R-IA) is concerned that “morale problems” are damaging CDC's “scientific capabilities,” says a spokesperson.

The concerns stem from a reorganization begun by CDC Director Julie Gerberding a year after she took office 4 years ago. CDC scientists have complained publicly about the reorganization, saying they've been shut out of management decisions and that many senior scientists have voted with their feet.

CDC spokesperson Tom Skinner acknowledges that “some employees aren't happy” but asserts that “CDC has never been in a better position to meet public health emergencies head-on.”

—JOCELYN KAISER

Australia Weighs Nuclear Power

SYDNEY—After following a nonnuclear policy for 20 years, Australia is set to reopen debate on expanding its nuclear power industry. Major issues to be explored are the expansion of the uranium industry and construction of nuclear power stations. A panel of experts will report its findings to Prime Minister John Howard in early 2007.

Some experts argue that the country could profit from a uranium enrichment and disposal industry. But others, noting that most Australian states oppose new power plant construction, say other energy sources should be explored.

—ELIZABETH FINKEL

Brain Transplant for Bonn Center

BERLIN—The Center for Advanced European Studies and Research (CAESAR), founded in Bonn in 1999, will soon join the Max Planck Society (MPG) as a new institute dedicated to neuroscience. The decision, announced last week, means that most of the center's 140 researchers will be let go.

A harsh critique from Germany's Science Council in 2004 found that CAESAR wasn't living up to expectations as a high-tech incubator, leading its governing council to seek advice from MPG. The society's surprising answer was that CAESAR should become its 79th institute, dropping current research in medical imaging, advanced materials, and bioelectronics in favor of neuroscience (*Science*, 7 April, p. 34).

MPG has said it would like to hire three director-level scientists and employ a total of 30 scientists.

—GRETCHEN VOGEL