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LOCAL INFORMATION AT TIHANGE N.P.P.

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

In our democratic countries, fair acceptance by the public of the various stages in the implementation of a nuclear programme is a condition sine qua non for its success.

In this respect, the public opinion of the local community always plays a major role and could become crucial in particular circumstances when, for instance, a new site is created or an accident occurs.

Therefore, local information should be given priority and be perceived as a key factor in any communication strategy. However, mere information is not enough. Information is like grain : it can only germinate in a well prepared soil. In other words, the fair and positive perception of any information or message relies not only on its quality but equally on the credibility of the source (utility, nuclear lobby, etc...) and the reservoir of goodwill it has been able to create within society.

The purpose of this paper is to relate the successful actions observed at Tihange N.P.P. This plant is located near the town of Huy along the river Meuse in Southern Belgium. Its total capacity amounts to 2,790 MW. The three PWR were commissioned respectively in 1975, 1983 and 1985.

2. BEING A FRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR

2.1. Planning

Belgium was fortunate enough to plan its first nuclear units at a time when anti-nuclear activists were almost unheard of.

Thus, the creation of Belgium's two nuclear sites at Doel and Tihange in 1968 was met with little or no opposition, from the local community or the public at large. The local authorities were very much in favour of these new big industrial settlements and the few unavoidable expropriations were sufficiently well compensated to become painless for the inhabitants concerned.

During planning it is essential to determine the lay-out of the plant and to include the necessary features to help minimise the objective nuisances which the surrounding population might suffer from. At Tihange for instance, considerable amounts have been spent to locate and design the cooling towers (160 m high) so that any potential discomfort (noise, artificial rain or fog, shadow from the plume, etc...) they may cause is reduced to a minimum.

2.2. Construction

A favourite theme with local opponents is that a nuclear power plant is an infrastructure of national interest which brings nothing but inconvenience to the local community.

A first answer to these critics lies in the amount of local taxes paid to the host municipality from the date the plant is commissioned. Tihange, with 3 operational units, brings the town of Huy the cash equivalent of US\$ 7 millions, or 1/3rd of the municipality's total income.

A second answer lies in the economic fall-out (both direct and indirect) resulting from construction activities. At Tihange, due care has been taken to ensure that sufficient orders are placed with local firms on the one hand and, on the other hand, that enough manpower is recruited locally for the site. This policy is followed through to the operational stage.

2.3. Operation

Besides the measures already mentioned, the insertion of a nuclear power plant in its socio-economic environment can be enhanced in many ways.

At Tihange for instance, a research centre was set up to study the possible use of heated water from the condensers which is normally discharged into the river. As a result of this, 3 companies were created respectively for intensive fish breeding, cultivation of ornamental plants and production of algae by-products.

Sponsoring is used increasingly. Already in the early stages of its establishment in Tihange, INTERCOM, the operating utility, started restoration work on a 16th century mansion, owned by the municipality, and which had fallen into disrepair. It is now used to entertain our guests. Our financial support has also been extended to the restoration of historic buildings in municipalities neighbouring Huy. Under Belgian law, these municipalities are not empowered to levy taxes on the power plant. However we do our utmost to make our presence advantageous to them.

Furthermore, our company regularly supports local cultural activities such as concerts, the theatre and exhibitions.

3. LOCAL INFORMATION FIRST

A constant policy at the Tihange NPP has been to give precedence to local information under all circumstances. This is particularly true in the event of an incident.

3.1. Incident reporting

As in any other country, the local authorities are directly involved in launching emergency operations in the event of an accident.

At Tihange, arrangements made with the Mayor of Huy are much more extensive. It has been agreed that any event, occurrence or incident which deviates even ever so slightly from the daily routine shall be reported to the Mayor without delay by phone or telex, before any other authority (national or regional) is alerted. Such an agreement can of course only be reached with authorities which are prepared to

deal with the information they receive in a fair and positive manner. The main advantage of such a procedure - besides generating a confident relationship with the municipality - is to eliminate the risks of being accused of concealing an incident, should we decide not to release a statement to the press about it.

However, our constant policy is to issue press-releases immediately, whether the incident be

- of significant importance
- insignificant but noticeable from the outside (e.g. a fire in construction works)
- or insignificant but likely to be unfairly reported (e.g. contamination of a worker).

Representatives of the local press as well as local correspondents of the national press are personally targeted by our press releases. It must be stressed that to be effective openness toward the media is on a par with personal and confident relationships between members of the press and persons responsible for information within the utility and/or the power plant.

3.2. Basic information

As for basic information about nuclear power, we remain convinced that the most effective communication technique is a visit to a power plant.

Two main factors corroborate this opinion. Firstly, people who decide to visit a power plant do so on their own initiative. This makes them receptive and motivated to listen to the message and information conveyed to them. Secondly, a personal contact with the human and technical reality of a nuclear power plant constitutes a striking and irreplaceable experience which is likely to feed people's minds with real pictures thus enabling them to better interpret nuclear information and events later.

Tihange welcomes about 20,000 visitors each year, many of which live in the surrounding area. Specific targets among the plant's neighbours are politicians, schools, physicians, lawyers, etc..

The 800 members of staff, 2/3rds of them living in Huy or in the adjoining municipalities, are regarded as the power plant's main ambassadors. They have to be well informed at all times of the plant's day-to-day events so as to answer queries from their acquaintances. At week-ends, they are free to invite parents and relatives to visit parts of the installation which are accessible.

To make the local population more familiar with daily life at the power plant, a newsletter called "Tihange-Contact" is periodically published and delivered to ca. 35,000 letterboxes. The articles mainly deal with operational performance, incidents, new equipment, who's who... and also external events like the Chernobyl disaster.

4. CONCLUSION

There is good evidence to believe that the Tihange nuclear power plant is presently well integrated in its socio-economic environment. The plant's management lives in a climate of positive "peaceful coexistence" with the local authorities, the last demonstration against the plant dates back to some 10 years ago and very little criticism, if any, is heard from the local community. Possibly the most convincing evidence of this relaxed atmosphere is that none of the candidates put forward by environmentalist parties were elected in the latest general and municipal elections at Huy.

Our dual policy aimed to promoting congenial neighbourly behaviour and giving priority to local information has undoubtedly significantly contributed to this result.