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NUCLEAR SAFETY: Commission outlines 5-point action plan

The twelve European Community member states must draw the lessons of Chernobyl and work together to resolve the problems posed by nuclear developments. This is the basic idea on which the European Commission's action plan for nuclear safety rests.

The plan, now before the Community's Council of Ministers, covers five policy areas. They range from protection of health to international cooperation, and include the safety of nuclear installations, procedures to be followed in the event of an emergency and research.

The accident at Chernobyl, as well as the various incidents within the EC itself, such as those at Sellafield, have shown clearly that the problems linked to the handling of radioactive materials do not stop at national frontiers. At the same time, it is obvious that the absence of cooperation between the countries concerned adds to the difficulties by causing additional disquiet among the population.

Europe* currently produces some 50% of the world's nuclear power, with only 14% of its population and 8% of its land surface. The safety of the 12-nation Community should involve, as far as possible, collaboration between all European countries. According to the Commission, the Community must play an active role in this area, especially in the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

But there are special links between the Community's twelve member states; they are all signatories to EURATOM, a treaty devoted entirely to nuclear energy. Which is why the European Commission takes the view that, whatever the outcome of their talks with other countries, the Twelve must have their own system of safeguards, information and action plan - and stop looking at nuclear safety as a purely national matter.

To protect people's health, the Commission wants to tighten up the existing standards against the danger of ionising radiation. It also wants to set up a Community-wide inspection system and to have member states adopt tolerance limits for radioactive contamination of foodstuffs on a long-term, rather than short-term basis, as happened after Chernobyl.

As for the safety of nuclear plants, the Commission is proposing a harmonisation of national standards for the design and construction of nuclear installations. It also plans to propose an information system on the characteristics of nuclear power stations. In the event of an emergency, the Community should also have its own systems of information and mutual aid. The Commission, in fact, is studying the different possibilities.

* includes Eastern Europe.

EDUCATION: Preparing children for life in a consumer society

In a consumer-oriented society knowing how to get value for money is as important as ... well, earning the money in the first place. But it takes more than moral fibre to resist the blandishments of salesmen. It takes education, in fact.

The European Community's education ministers certainly think so. They have decided that schools must teach the young how to choose intelligently among the ever-increasing range of goods and services available in a modern society, and to be aware of their rights and responsibilities as consumers.

The ministers have left it to the educational authorities in each member state to decide just how consumer economics will be taught in their primary and secondary schools. That it can be done is shown by the pilot actions carried out successfully throughout the Community between 1979 and 1984.

The ministers have asked the European Commission to undertake a number of activities, on a priority basis, over the next three years. They include reflections on teacher training, an exchange of views in the production and distribution of suitable teaching material and studies on the introduction of consumer education in universities.

AID: ECU 6 million for research in coal, steel industries

The European Community may be running down its coal and steel industries, but research into making them safer and cleaner continues. The European Commission in fact has just given Community research institutions, including Britain's National Coal Board, and Italy's Centro Sperimentale Metallurgico, ECU 5.8 million* to help finance 30 research projects.

The safety of miners remains a continuing preoccupation. Some ECU 2.6 million is to be divided among 17 research projects aimed at improving safety in mining, including methods of helping miners trapped underground.

Another group of research projects focuses on the reduction of coal dust and noise; it is to receive ECU 1.7 million.

The third group of research projects relates to the technical control of pollution within the steel plants themselves and in their neighbourhood. The Community is contributing ECU 1.4 million towards their cost.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

EDUCATION: COMETT has taken off ... for 18 months, at any rate

Universities and companies in the 12-nation European Community will be able to work together to train specialists in the advanced technologies ... for the next 18 months at least. In effect, the Community's education ministers have adopted COMETT, the Community-wide education and training programme in technology. However, they approved expenditure of ECU 45 million* only, as compared to the ECU 80 million sought by the Commission.

With its first stage set to last three years, COMETT can go ahead therefore until the end of 1988, when the ministers will meet again to decide whether to extend it for another year.

COMETT aims at establishing a Community-wide network of universities/ companies; organising training programmes for university graduates and specialists from the private sector; launching European programmes of inter-company training and, finally, encouraging the use of new technologies in training methods.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: A new step towards a genuine common market

The industry ministers of the 12-nation European Community have just taken the first step towards a common market in telecommunications, by adopting a new directive on the testing of terminal equipment. As a result, equipment which has been tested in an approved laboratory in one member state will not have to undergo fresh tests elsewhere in the Community.

Computer terminals, with their key boards and screens, are a part of the daily life of a growing number of Europeans. Linked to the good old-fashioned telephone, they are fast becoming an indispensable piece of communications equipment. European manufacturers must be in a position, therefore, to turn them out in large numbers, for sale throughout the Community at rockbottom prices.

At present, manufacturers wanting to sell their equipment in all 12 member states must have it tested 12 times over, at their own expense. Once the new Community directive has become part of national legislation, such conformity tests need to be carried out only once.

In the next stage, set in principle for 1988, each of the Twelve will recognize the approvals granted by the others. After which, truly European standards will need to be adopted.

ENVIRONMENT: Preventing a new Seveso or a new Bhopal

The European Community's environment ministers have just tightened up the Community regulation on the stocking and use by industry of 13 chemicals likely to cause serious accidents. The new agreement strengthens considerably the measures of surveillance introduced in 1982, under the so-called Seveso directive, following the accident at a chemical plant in northern Italy.

An industrial or trading company which stocks or uses any one of 178 chemicals, above a certain quantity, is required to inform the local authorities, under the Seveso directive. It must give them full details regarding the operations to be carried out, the safety measures provided for and the action envisaged in the event of an emergency.

For some of the most dangerous chemicals on the list the ministers have sharply reduced the quantities that can be stocked or used in manufacture without any controls. In the case of methyl isocyanate, responsible for the Bhopal catastrophe, the quantity has been reduced from 1000 to 150 kgs. For phosgene, the permitted quantity is now 750 kgs. (down from 20 tonnes); for chlore, 75 tonnes as against 200 tonnes.

The Commission will propose new measures of surveillance and control in the light of experience.

ANIMALS: Community aid for bullfighting?

Owners of bullrings are as much entitled to aid from the European Community's Regional Development Fund (ERDF) as any one else - provided the member state in question can demonstrate to the European Commission's satisfaction that there is a "clear link" between the projected investment and tourism. However, sports and leisure centres as such cannot receive ERDF funds.

It is unlikely that the British Euro-MP, Richard Cottrell, will be entirely reassured by the Commission's reply to his question. He had been looking for firm assurances that not an ECU of regional aid would go to support bullfighting in Spain and Portugal, once they join the Community.

RESEARCH: ECU 70 million* to find, develop new raw materials

High technology is changing the raw materials used by manufacturing industry. Telephone lines are now being made of glass rather than copper, and the magnets used in many electrical car parts will soon be made from new materials.

But in addition to providing industry with advanced materials, high technology has a part to play in the exploration, mining and processing of minerals, and the recycling of non-ferrous metals, including chromium and tungsten. And through the application of biotechnology to forestry, a traditional raw material, wood, can be made more versatile and its production greatly increased.

But continuing research is needed to ensure the benefits to industry of high technology. The European Commission's research ministers have therefore adopted a 4-year, ECU 70 million research programme on materials. Perhaps the most innovative part of it is the sub-programme European Research on Advanced Materials (EURAM), to which the ministers have allocated the lion's share, ECU 30 million.

EURAM will help European industry catch up with its competitors in developing new, sophisticated materials, which at present it must either import or manufacture, generally under licence from an American or Japanese company. EURAM therefore covers not only light alloys, based on such relatively abundant materials as aluminium and magnesium, but also engineering ceramics (for use in Diesel engines) and composite materials made, for example, by combining synthetic resins with carbon or glass fibres.

Another sub-programme relates to minerals. ECU 20 million has been set aside for research into prospecting techniques, including remote sensing, the application of robotics in mines and the modelling both of mining operations and mineral processing.

Two smaller sub-programmes (ECU 10 million each) cover 1) the recycling of non-ferrous metals, on the one hand, and waste on the other, and 2) the use of wood as a renewable raw material. The first is aimed at making the European mining and metallurgical industries more competitive, even while reducing the Community's vulnerability as regards certain strategic metals. The second is designed in part to reduce Community dependence on imported wood.

The ECU 70 million provided by the Community will meet only part of the costs, as the programmes are to be implemented on a shared-cost basis.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71

EFTA: Community, European Free Trade area, draw closer together

The nations of the Old World are moving slowly towards closer economic cooperation, although an economic community stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals remains a distant dream.

The European Community and European Free Trade Area are fast cementing their relationship. At their recent meeting in the Icelandic capital the European Commissioner for external relations, Willy De Clercq, and the EFTA ministerial council agreed to open negotiations on the introduction of the Community's Single Administrative Document for trade between the EC and EFTA.

If successful, the way will have been opened from 1 January 1988 for the total computerisation of customs formalities in Western Europe. The elimination of all paperwork should give fresh impetus to a 2-way trade which last year totalled ECU 190 billion* and was evenly divided between exports and imports.

The two Western economic groupings are also busy laying the basis for cooperation in science and technology. Framework agreements have been agreed with nearly all EFTA countries and the EC is in the process of opening up its high-technology programmes - such as ESPRIT (information technology) and RACE (telecommunications) - to the participation of EFTA firms and research institutions.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

AID: Community steps up aid to some of the poorest developing countries

In a world of fluctuating commodity prices, there is an obvious need to stabilise the export earnings of developing countries. The European Community had been doing just this through STABEX, a scheme set up over 10 years ago to help the 66 developing countries linked to it through the Lomé Convention.

The European Commission has now worked out the details for extending STABEX to the least developed countries in Asia and Latin America which are not signatories to the Convention. There are nine of them, including Afghanistan, which has been excluded for the time being.

The immediate beneficiaries are likely to be Bangladesh, Nepal, Laos and Haiti. To the 49, mainly agricultural, products whose exports are covered by STABEX, the Community has now added jute, of which Bangladesh is a major producer. Among the other products on the list are tea, coffee, cocoa, vegetable oils, bananas, cloves, pepper and shrimps.

The additional cost to the Community is put at ECU 50 million* at most, over the next five years.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.63 or IR£ 0.71.

POPULATION: Relatively fewer Europeans by the year 2000

The world will be less "European" in the year 2000. By the beginning of the 21st century the population of the 12-nation European Community will have increased by 2.6%, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office. Meanwhile, the population of Japan will have gone up by 6%, that of the United States by 13% and the Soviet Union of 15%, notes Eurostat, which has put the rise in world population at a hefty 29%.

It has estimated the Community's population in the year 2000 at nearly 330 million, as against 321 million in 1984, when the birth rate was 1.2% - well below that for the world as a whole (2.7%), the United States (1.6%) and the Soviet Union (2%). No wonder, therefore, that the Community's population is growing more slowly than that of the "superpowers".

Only in Ireland is the birth rate higher than in the U.S., while the rate for Japan (1.2%) is very close to the European average. But Japan has a death rate well below the European - 0.6% as compared to 1.0% - which explains why the Japanese population could grow twice as fast as the European between now and the year 2000.

Within the Community, population is declining fastest in the Federal Republic of Germany and Denmark, with fewer births than deaths by 100 population in 1984. By the year 2000 the population of Germany should fall by 3.2%, while that of Denmark remains stable. The same fate could overtake Belgium, according to the experts. Its population could fall by 2,3% by the year 2000.

Ireland, in contrast, seems hardly threatened by an ageing population. With a record birth rate of nearly 2% in 1984, its population could grow by some 17% by the year 2000. The U.K., Portugal, France, Spain and the Netherlands all recorded birth rates above the Community average, but not dramatically so.

Germany, which had a population of over 61 million in 1984, will remain the most populous member state but with two million fewer inhabitants. The three other "large" countries - the U.K., France and Italy - will have roughly the same population in 15 years' time, just under 58 million.

Spain will have more than 40 million, the Netherlands 15 million and Portugal 11 million. The experts forecast a population of 9.6 million for Belgium, roughly 5 million for Denmark, 4 million for Ireland and 373,000 for Luxembourg.

SOCIAL SECURITY: Both income and spending to decline in 1987

Roughly 27% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the 10-nation European Community* goes to provide "social protection". The term, wider than the more usual "social benefits", is used by the European Commission in its latest report on the 1987 projections of social protection income and expenditure compared to 1982.**

These projections put total spending at 27% of Community GDP, slightly down from 27.4% in 1982. These figures conceal appreciable differences among the Community's members states, however. Expenditure in 1987 is put at 20.9% for Greece, rising to 32.5% for the Netherlands, with spending in Britain (22.2%) and Ireland (22.7%) close to the Greek. At the other end of the scale are Belgium (28.1%), Germany (28.5%) and France (29.2%).

The Commission's projections point to a fall in spending in all the countries, except France and Greece, compared to 1982. In the U.K., 1982 expenditure was an estimated 23.5% of GDP, in Ireland 22.8%.

The 1987 projections put total income at 28.8% of Community GDP, a fraction down from the 1982 figure (28.9%). But the level of income also varies from country to country. It is projected at 21.4% of GDP for Greece, rising to 40% in the Netherlands.

The 1987 projections are 26.4% for the U.K. and 23.9% for Ireland. With three exceptions - Greece, Italy and the Netherlands - these projections are below those for 1982, partly because of more optimistic assumptions as to the rise in national GDP.

In 1987 some 66% of the EC's social security income will come from social contributions (by employers and insured persons) and another 28% from governments, according to the Commission's projections. The breakdown is very similar, in fact, to what it was in 1982. But the two components have been growing at very different rates between 1982 and 1987. Total income has been rising at 1.2% a year on average for the Community as a whole. But the growth in social security contributions should average 1.6% a year, compared to 0.2% for funds from governments.

Expenditure is both in cash (e.g. unemployment benefits) and kind (e.g. health care). According to the Commission, cash benefits should represent 18% of Community GDP in 1987 and benefits in kind 7.5%. The corresponding figures for the U.K. are 15.5% and 6.4% and for Ireland 15.2% and 7.4%.

* The EC prior to the entry of Spain and Portugal.

** Medium-Term Projections of Social Protection Expenditure and its Financing.