

6 June 2006

Media release

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Is Darwin at risk from Indonesian nuclear fall-out?

Plans by Indonesia to build a nuclear power plant on Java could pose risks for northern Australia, according to the Australia Institute.

The head of Indonesia's National Atomic Power Agency, Soedyartomo Soentono, announced last month that investors from France, South Korea and Japan have offered to fund the Rp35 trillion (US\$3.8 billion) nuclear power plant that Indonesia plans to build at the foot of Mt Muria on the north coast of Central Java.

When plans (subsequently shelved) to build at Mt Muria were first announced by the Suharto Government in 1993, researchers using a global meteorological model at the Australian National University found that "the lives of thousands of Australians could be harmed" if a major accident at the plant caused a release of radioactive gas during summer months.

Maps show that at that time of the year prevailing winds would take only a few days to carry a radioactive cloud across the Northern Territory, including Darwin and Kakadu National Park, and the northwest of Western Australia.

The Mt Muria reactor would be located in an area subject to intense geological instability, including earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis. The planned nuclear plant will be located on the coast to make use of sea water for cooling.

According to the Antara news agency, construction of the 4,000-MW plant is due to start in 2010 and be completed in 2015. It is likely to be supplied with uranium sourced from Australia.

"Although the risks of a major accident are very low, a cloud of radiation blowing over northern Australia would pose a severe danger to public safety and would jeopardise the cattle industries over an enormous area", said Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton.

"The Federal Government should initiate an inquiry into the possible impacts and develop a contingency plan for such a situation."

In 1994, the Opposition science spokesman, Peter McGauran, called on the Labor Government to pressure Jakarta to cancel plans to build nuclear reactors citing concerns over public safety. Opposition members also called on the Government to develop an action plan to deal with a nuclear accident in Java.