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TRANSCRIPTION
PRESS CONFERENCE THREE MILE ISLAND INCIDENT
GOVERNOR DICK THORNBURGH
APRIL 3, 1979
9:30 p.m.
GOVERNOR'S RECEPTION ROOM

GOVERNOR THORNBURGH'S STATEMENT:

HARRISBURG (April 3) -- "Mr. Harold Denton briefed me earlier tonight on the situation at Three Mile Island. He told me that the hydrogen bubble has dissipated, that the reactor core is stable, and that he and his associates are considering various plans to bring it to a safe shutdown.

"I am, of course, gratified by this good news. All Pennsylvanians owe Mr. Denton their gratitude for the cool, competent, and responsible job I believe he is doing, not only in monitoring operations at the plant, but in reporting his findings to an anxious public as well.

"When I asked for a leading expert to provide me with reliable information as a basis for decisions I must make, President Carter made what appears to be a superlative choice, and I commend him for it.

"As many of you know, one of the most serious problems we have in this episode has been the unending flow of rumors hurled at us from a variety of sources.

"Some of the sources of these rumors never have been to Three Mile Island. Some of them never have been to Harrisburg. Some I dare say, never have been to Pennsylvania.

"Yet their claims and speculations have been no small barrier to our effort to keep things in proper perspective during these seven days of tension.

"A nuclear specialist was quoted today as observing that alarming reports probably caused more psychological harm than did the radiation itself.

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"I think there is truth in that statement. The fact is that at no time have a variety of test measurements shown levels of contamination that were dangerous to normally healthy people. At no time have the measurements remotely approached the danger point in our air, our water, or our milk.

"To deal with these rumors, I have opened a 24-hour citizens information center, so that the people of Pennsylvania can get the facts they need, when they need them, and so that we in government can be better informed about the questions of greatest concern to the people we serve. The telephone number is (800) 932-0784.

"I have placed, and I will continue to place, the public health and safety as my paramount consideration in this period. For that reason, I've been taking, and I will continue to take, every precautionary measure that is at all warranted by the facts.

"For that reason, I am continuing my advisory that pregnant women and preschool children stay out of the area within five miles of the plant.

"For that reason, I am continuing my advisory that the schools in the area -- AND THAT AREA ONLY -- remain closed.

KI | "For that reason, I am holding precautionary shipments of medicine that were sent to us, and I will order them distributed only upon what I regard as a calm and reasonable finding from federal and state health authorities that such a distribution is necessary."

"The news this evening is better. I think we all can hold to a reasonable opinion that the prospects for a catastrophic event have lessened. We must now begin the long and perhaps more arduous task of assessing what the long term consequences of this event will be and that will need the help of every American.

"Thank you, I will take questions."

REPORTER: Governor, -----inaudible----- have been grossly exaggerated that we have nothing to fear?

GOVERNOR: No, it is not. I think there have been several instances where exaggeration and distortions and mis-statements have been counterproductive in efforts to keep an aura of calm and one in which we can make a dispassionate assessment of the true facts.

REPORTER: Governor, in his briefing this afternoon, Mr. Denton seemed quite confident that everything was under control and that there was no more hazard, certainly no more hazard of a hydrogen explosion or anything like that. Why in that light have you been keeping doors locked?

GOVERNOR: His advice to me and the advice of those persons who are charged in state government with the health and safety of the residents of the area, is still that there is a risk to pregnant women and preschool children in the area within the five mile radius of the plant and as a precautionary measure we have continued with our advice that they not remain or travel to that area.

REPORTER: -----inaudible-----

GOVERNOR: The risk as I am advised is that intermittent emissions because of the particular susceptibility to radiation of women in pregnancy and preschool children, could have some adverse effects.

REPORTER: Governor you are criticizing and probably well so reports of -----and unsubstantiated reports yet for the past two-and-a-half days, you and the members of the press office have been almost totally inaccessible to us. Our phone calls remain unanswered, Doors are being closed. We cannot get through to your press secretary, for information that we need. How can we get the information if we cannot get through to you or your people?

GOVERNOR: Well, let me say this about information. I think my concern, and I suspect your concern, and I know the concerns of the people of Pennsylvania, have been with respect to the technical status of the situation at Three-Mile Island. The very people that I am critical of for irresponsible statements would find some additional fodder for their analysis if I were to have stated my views on those critical technical situations. I am not technically competent to pass judgement on the efforts that have been undertaken in the last day and a half at Three Mile Island. I have been fully briefed on it, I think that the important charge that I have as Governor is to look after the health and safety of the people of Pennsylvania has been met through the daily advisories that we have given to those people in the affected areas. I am perhaps, overly sensitive to my technical incapacibilities. I have made it a point in any meetings with the press so far, to even avoid the use of the word millirem, because I can't really know what a millirem means. If you have been denied information by myself or the members of my staff, I am sorry. We had an extraordinary number of news people here. We have tried to be responsive.

REPORTER: To follow up on that, do you feel that the flow of information from a technical standpoint has been adequate?

GOVERNOR: I do.

REPORTER: Inaudible---- -normal circumstances or even less than
-----inaudible. Why are you still having
the voluntary ban on pregnant women or is there something
else we don't know-----trust those figures or do you
not trust those figures?

GOVERNOR: I think I indicated that the suggestion that pregnant
women and preschool children remain out of the area within
a five mile radius of the plant was based on advice
to me that they are particularly susceptible even to the
low levels of radiation that have been emitted during
the time following the incident.

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REPORTER: On normal levels does that mean that they should never be in that area?

GOVERNOR: The levels now are normal, but we have not brought this incident to a complete termination and I think in the case of people who are particularly susceptible to radiation responsible to advise them that they should be cautious about returning to the area.

REPORTER: Governor, would you say that the worst is over?

GOVERNOR: I am saying that in my opinion that we stand at a point where the chances of any catastrophic event have been greatly reduced, that may mean that the worse is over. But I am not so sure that it doesn't mean that we are approaching a much more crucial interval for the future of central Pennsylvania from the point of view of public health, environmental integrity and the economic development of this area.

REPORTER: How long should pregnant woman and pre-school children be expected to stay away from their homes. -- inaudible-- How long must they stay away?

GOVERNOR: At least, they are free to return. My advice is that they not do it. It is based on a technical reading from Mr. Denton that will last presently until he gives me a supplemental or an additional briefing that indicates that in our opinion that it is safe to return.

REPORTER: Governor, you said that a moment ago that you did not use the term millirem because you did not understand what it means. You have been briefed by Mr. Denton for a week and I know he has made --inaudible-- sense. Do you know anymore about this situation than we do or is Denton the only one who really knows - he keeps saying it is up to you to decide who should go in and out of areas. But is he the one who really is making the decisions based on how he briefs you.

GOVERNOR: I think Mr. Denton is the best available source of the technical information that I and my health and environmental and emergency management and logistics people need to make the decisions that are our responsibility.

REPORTER: People in the area have said that they would like to know either now or after this is over - what the effect of radiation has been on their body. Now the other day we asked Mr. Denton some questions he said that it would be up to the state to give the people an answer. Have you formulated any plans for these people to be screened?

GOVERNOR: Well I think the time for formulation of those kinds of plans will have to await the termination of the event. One of the things that will be extremely important and I think productive for the future of environmental health, public health of this country is a thorough evaluation and assessment following an investigation of the facts in their entirety relating to this circumstance. We will certainly take whatever steps are necessary to enhance our capability to understand precisely what happened and how we can better respond.

REPORTER: How would you answer their immediate concerns about their health?

GOVERNOR: About their health? I would frankly answer it - I don't know.

REPORTER: Governor, you made a statement a moment ago about possible entering more crucial period now. What do you mean by that and what is your preliminary assessment what this is going to mean to central Pennsylvanian's?

GOVERNOR: What I meant was, that when you folks are all gone we will be here in Pennsylvania struggling with the need to deal with residual public health problems, environmental integrity the effect that this may have had on the economy of Pennsylvania including our Agricultural economy, and right now I can't tell you what those effects are. This is an unprecedented event with respect to the impact to all three of those areas. And it means that we have a substantial rebuilding job to do after we assess what damage may have occurred.

REPORTER: Have you had any input so far as to what economic debts you may face?

GOVERNOR: No. I really think that the time to assess and evaluate and study these kinds of incidences is not when you are in mid-stream. And I think that are task will be initially to carry out just such a assessment as soon as things return more than normal.

REPORTER: With all the disruptions that this incident has brought to this rather large area of central Pennsylvania in the last week, would you as Governor prefer to see that facility remain closed forever.

GOVERNOR: I think we will have to wait an assessment of precisely what happened, whether it can be rectified by appropriate safety measures, what the recommendation are that result from the investigation that President Carter has promised to undertake and then we will make a decision. I will certainly say this - that the burden of proof of those on those who would press for the early resumption of operations on Three Mile Island is extremely heavy.

REPORTER: Governor, are you going to ask for any kind of federal assistance -- inaudible --

GOVERNOR: Certainly are.

REPORTER: Have you already.

GOVERNOR: We have not asked for any financial assistance, we are receiving of course the assistance in emergency preparedness and in logistical support and advice on technical matters. But frankly, we are most anxious to bring this whole situation to a close so that we can assess the damage and seek whatever we can in the way of federal help which I expect to be generously given.

REPORTER: -- inaudible --

GOVERNOR: Not at this time, no.

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REPORTER: Governor, has Mr. Denton given you any kind of a timetable, at least tentative, as to when he might expect a cold shut-down?

GOVERNOR: No.

REPORTER: Governor, will any more nuclear plants be welcomed in the Commonwealth?

GOVERNOR: I have always expressed my concern about the safety of nuclear energy facilities in this Commonwealth. As I indicated in response to the previous question I think those who would press for any expansion of present nuclear energy facilities in this state have a very heavy burden to prove to me so far as this Pennsylvanian is concerned.

CRITCHLOW: Only one more question please, the Governor has another committment.

GOVERNOR: Governor, there is an addition -- inaudible -- what are your feelings about that unit presumably --inaudible--.

GOVERNOR: I think that I would express my feeling that anyone who wants to resume or expand nuclear energy facilities in this state has a pretty heavy burden with this Pennsylvanian. Thank you.

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