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THE "MOTHER JONES" ARTICLE RE TARAPUR REACTORS

In this article a number of Mr. Jacobs' dramatic scenarios were fabrications of his imagination.

1. My trip report did not mention and nowhere did I say that I visited the Tarapur reactor; in fact I did not go to the plant: all the conferences in India were held in offices or laboratories near the city. Hence I made no inspections and did not see "an incredible sight of Indian workers perched high in the rafters...using bamboo poles..." Neither did I write, or say to Jacobs, that Tarapur was "a prime candidate for a nuclear disaster...though my oral report upon my return could have conveyed that impression. He asked me about the use of bamboo poles; I confirmed that I had heard that this was so, could understand how it might have happened, but did not know it as a fact. Mr. Jacobs was perhaps irked with me for trying to answer his questions in perspective rather than the way he may have wished.
2. Mr. Jacobs states that my report "did not raise an immediate alarm" but "instead it was sent to 'files' which...means that no action is to be taken."

On the contrary, I told him that my trip report was sent to the Commission and that followup assistance in the areas requested was arranged. I believe I also mentioned that several earlier AEC assistance teams had been sent, but I did not dwell on either of these topics extensively and he did not inquire further on this. In retrospect, it is clear that he already had the whole story from Steve and others before his conversation with me.

Actually, upon my return from India my trip report was discussed at Commission level and a Commissioner promptly called GE (and possibly Bechtel) to request an immediate conference. This conference was a rather stormy one. GE maintained that most of the problems were caused by the Indians, for operating too long before shutdown and cleanup, for not following procedures, etc.; that GE had already supplied assistance and equipment far beyond their legal obligations to the extent of millions of dollars. Nevertheless, agreement was reached for experts to furnish assistance on the items requested and persons were sent to Tarapur possibly including one or more from Oak Ridge, though I do not recall clearly.

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In our conversation, Mr. Jacobs did not reveal that the focus of his attention was centered on Tarapur; instead he mentioned several times a somewhat vague concern about how industry was carrying out safety responsibilities in building overseas reactors, but did not pursue this in any systematic way. Also he did not inquire except in a very brief and superficial way the AEC's (NRC's) role, responsibilities and policies re nuclear safety in reactors sold overseas. Hence this topic was discussed only very briefly. The role of IAEA was also briefly mentioned, but again he did not pursue that topic.

Thus, it would appear, of course, that Mr. Jacobs may not have been so much interested in the role of industry in safety of their products or in how safety in Tarapur could be improved as he is in using troubled Tarapur as a means of advancing the antinuclear cause in the United States -- or elsewhere.

Nevertheless, it is a very real fact that controls on a formal basis do not now exist through the IAEA, through reactor vendor practices or through the governments of reactor vendor nations for coping with reactor safety problems in sovereign nations that have purchased nuclear reactors. If a purchasing country, through lack of information and training, through purchase of inadequately designed reactors, or through careless or inadequate operating and maintenance practices, chooses to operate in dangerous and unsafe modes there is little that presently can be done about it except provide advice and assistance, if asked, on an informal voluntary basis. Thus, there could be more Tarapur-type situations, though the general availability of information, reactor design adequacy and responsibility in reactor vending is now much further advanced than was the situation when the first U.S. overseas reactor, Tarapur, came along.

For 3 or so years I have not kept in close touch with the situation in Tarapur, but it is my distinct impression that the situation there now is a very great deal better than it was at the time of my visit in 1972; this year might have been their "lowest." In fact, the Indian report "Safety Experience in the Operation of a BWR Station in India," by P. Abraham, D. Pattnaik and S. D. Soman, which was in preparation at the time of my visit, revealed upon its subsequent release not only an excellent presentation and description of the factual difficulties then existing but numerous plans on their own initiative for replacement of faulty or inadequate equipment, construction of enlarged storage facilities and reduction in radiation levels. Mr. Jacobs makes no mention of these inprocess improvements though this report was released to him along with my trip report in response to his request under the Freedom of Information Act.

In the last 3 years or so the IAEA has begun to advance effective programs for development of codes and standards, for training programs, and for the beginnings of safety inspection programs to serve the nuclear nations. Some positive effects are already noted. With encouragement and support -- and with further extension into certain additional areas... for example, standardization of reactor purchasing practices... these IAEA programs could develop into an effective mechanism for enhancing the level of nuclear reactor safety in a major degree.

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