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French nuclear safety at risk from outsourcing : report

[Geert De Clercq](#) July 5, 2018

PARIS (Reuters) - France's nuclear plants are a safety threat because of their excessive reliance on outsourcing, the risk of terror attacks and a lack of operational rigor, a parliament report said.

France is the world's most nuclear-reliant country, with state-owned EDF generating 75 percent of its power from 58 aging nuclear reactors spread around the country, many of which have suffered safety scares in recent years.

Following a string of nuclear plant break-ins by Greenpeace militants, aimed at highlighting the vulnerability of EDF's reactors, the French parliament launched an investigation into nuclear security in February.

"Nuclear plants are not chocolate factories... this is a dangerous activity," report coordinator Barbara Pompili said.

She said an excessive reliance on outsourcing, with up to 80 percent of maintenance handled by contractors, was leading to a loss of internal competence at the utility.

EDF has had to close several reactors and delay the opening of a new one because of quality issues with some suppliers.

The falsification of manufacturing documentation at the Creusot foundry of EDF supplier Areva - now bought up by EDF and renamed Framatome - has led to temporary plant closures and an ongoing investigation.

EDF is also waiting for the results of an inquiry into faulty weldings executed by a subcontractor at a nuclear plant under construction in Flamanville, in northwest France.

The report blamed the fall of a 450-tonne steam generator during maintenance at EDF's Paluel 2 reactor on problems with cooperation between EDF and its subcontractors. Paluel 2 has been offline since the May 2015 incident.

EDF denied it was over-reliant on subcontractors.

“A large part of the maintenance on our reactors is done by the firms who have produced their components, they know these parts better than anyone else,” Dominique Minière, the head of EDF’s reactor fleet, told reporters.

The report criticized the industry’s “ruling out rupture” concept - the assumption that key nuclear components are made so well that malfunctioning can be ruled out.

“There are no emergency procedures for certain types of accidents because they are assumed to be impossible,” it said.

Illustrating that risk, Areva-Framatome has produced a flawed reactor vessel cover for the Flamanville reactor, which will force EDF to replace the piece by 2024, just a few years after its expected commercial startup.

Parliament also warned against external threats.

“French nuclear installations have not been designed to withstand terrorist aggression, simply because terrorism was not an issue at the time (they were built),” the report said.

Following discussions with MPs, Pompili said Google had agreed to pixellate the contours of nuclear plants on its maps.

The report warned of the risk of “Germanwing syndrome”, referring to a 2015 crash where a pilot purposely flew his passenger jet into a French mountainside, saying nuclear plant operators needed some level of psychiatric supervision.

Reporting by Geert De Clercq ; Editing by Kirsten Donovan



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