

Atomic waste 'scandal' threatens West German nuclear industry

by Ralf Schauerhammer

Over the course of January, Bonn has been swept by a "nuclear scandal" which had been building up for several months. This one has a significance going far beyond the borders of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The scandal was sparked by Social Democratic parliamentarian and former Research Minister Volker Hauff, who charged on Jan. 15 that police investigating the nuclear company, Nukem, in Hanau near Frankfurt, had "found evidence" proving that the treaty embargoing atomic weapons from West Germany had been violated. Traces of weapons-grade material were allegedly found in storage containers in Germany supposed to contain only low-grade nuclear wastes.

One day before Hauff's declarations, Environment Minister Töpfer had taken away the operating license of the Nukem firm, as he had taken away the license of its subsidiary, Transnuklear, a few weeks earlier. The action against Nukem was taken on grounds of irregularities in transactions relating to the transport of low- to moderate-grade radioactive wastes. In this environment, Hauff's charges hit like a bombshell, even though, two days later, Hauff had still failed to produce his "reliable informant" despite pressures from the state prosecutor's office. Instead, he quietly retracted his statement.

The beginning of the "nuclear scandal" goes back nearly a year. In April 1987, the manager of Transnuklear brought a lawsuit against suspected embezzlers of company funds. Nukem, with its subsidiaries, has a near-monopoly on the supply of fuel elements to nuclear plants and on the transport of nuclear wastes in Germany. Last summer, it came out that bribes had been paid to employees of various nuclear plants, as well as to collaborators of the Belgian research center in Mol, where low- and moderate-grade radioactive wastes from German nuclear plants are processed and cemented into containers for final storage in Germany.

Since early December, the "nuclear container" stories have been capturing the headlines. It has been established that some of the containers manifested "atypical" radiation characteristics and contained atomic refuse of "uncertain origin." Cesium-137 and cobalt-60 were measured. The presence of cesium-137 is an indication that traces of highly radioactive atomic refuse from the nuclear fuel cycle were

present in the containers. It was concluded from that, that traces of plutonium must have also been present in the containers, which was subsequently confirmed. This "cargo" had cleverly been mixed in with the German by-products in Mol, in the full knowledge that those on the receiving end, bound by their own bribe-taking, would be unable to protest.

In December, one of the employees of Transnuklear, who was already in custody in the bribery case, committed suicide in his cell.

The number of "suspicious containers" grew day by day, and in January reached a reported total of 2,500. In fact, most of these containers are perfectly in order, but nevertheless, they are "under suspicion," and have to be tested again. The plutonium hysteria has reached such a level in West Germany that it has umbraged even the media spectacle that followed the Chernobyl disaster.

A flood of rumors

It was into this situation that Hauff's charge burst: a public charge that weapons-grade material was being shipped to Pakistan and Libya, an evasion of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Volker Hauff was by no means alone in this. A flood of rumors broke out.

The first rumor: Various sources implied that Nukem subsidiary Hobek had declared to be production waste, portions of the highly enriched uranium-235 that it received from the United States for the production of fuel elements for the THTR-300 reactor. It thereby evaded the bookkeeping of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Allegedly then, the fragments of U-235 from the delivered "refuse" were put back together in Mol.

Informants, if they ever existed, have so far remained in the shadows, so something more has to come out, if any of this is to be believed. Highly enriched U-235 would be of interest to weapons dealers, because it is technically much easier to build a bomb with U-235 than with plutonium. But militating against this rumor is the fact that Hobek, just to build a single bomb, would have had to divert a considerable percentage of its processed materials in this way over a period of three years.

The second rumor: Weapons-grade material is being

shipped to Pakistan from an area of Mol that is not under the control of the IAEA, the shut-down plant of the Eurochemic company. This rumor is based on the fact that the IAEA agreements exclude control over certain shut-down plants. It turns out that this rumor comes from the gossipy magazine, *Bonner Energie Report*, which stressed that the allegation, as given to the Hessen state government, was "unproven." From there the unproven allegation—upgraded by official government investigation—made its way into the media as "strong suspicions."

The third rumor: From Mol, German nuclear materials allegedly arrived in Pakistan via the city of Lübeck in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. The source of this assertion is the Belgian Green Party member who sits in the European Parliament, Paul Staes. His "train of evidence" is more or less as follows. The holding company Intergulf in Monrovia, Liberia is run by two well-known Pakistani weapons dealers. The "material" is transshipped to Pakistan via a small firm in Lübeck which, in turn, is owned by the Intergulf subsidiary, Hansatransport, in Bremen. His "suspicion" fits right in with the Green electoral campaign in Schleswig-Holstein. Militant Greens there, in collaboration with Social Democratic chairman Björn Engholm, have stopped legal nuclear-materials transport under threat of violence.

The fourth rumor: Researchers from the German nuclear research center in Karlsruhe have "secretly" developed an "ash-burning process" in Mol, by which plutonium can be reconstituted out of waste products. The source for this is a daily newspaper in Hanover, and it is the topic on which the "physicist" Helmut Hirsch from the "Ecology Group" has held forth in various magazines. The process described is actually going on, but in no way "secretly." At the beginning of last year, the Karlsruhe research center proudly announced that it had succeeded in obtaining plutonium—for the purpose of better storage—from waste products. A total of 6 kilograms of plutonium was obtained during the testing process, carried out under the supervision of the IAEA.

The fifth rumor: The murder of Iraqi Shi'ite leader Mehdi al-Hakim in Khartoum, Sudan, can be traced back to a "nuclear feud" between Iran and Iraq. Both states have allegedly stocked up on the "atomic black market" with enriched uranium and plutonium for a dozen atomic bombs. Between Sudan and Libya, there is a close collaboration based on trading oil for uranium, set up in a secret clause of the trade agreement signed in 1986 in Tripoli. It is also alleged, according to statements from the Tripoli harbor management, that deliveries of plutonium and enriched uranium arrive in Libya from Antwerp; the Belgian cargo papers mislabel the products. The source is a mysterious "correspondent" Heinz Gestrein, behind whom one suspects the Israeli intelligence service.

From the standpoint of German internal politics, the thrust of the affair fits into the Soviet goal of dismantling the German nuclear industry. The Greens and the Social Democrats

have made this dismantling one of their primary objectives.

Now, statements are piling up from the ruling "conservative" parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), which stress as the precondition for their support for nuclear power, the "special reliability" of the nuclear industry which is in fact written into Germany's legal code. Not to be overlooked is the zeal with which even the CDU ministers in Bonn and Hessen are working on measures against the industry.

If a firm which is so vital for the German nuclear industry, Nukem, remains closed even for several weeks, the industry will suffer a blow from which it may never recover. Moreover, on Jan. 23, it was announced that the "Max von Laue-Paul Languévin" research reactor in Grenoble, France, can't be operated now because a nuclear fuel element cannot be delivered by Nukem, and numerous other European nuclear research centers are also affected.

International ramifications

Internationally, the anti-nuclear campaign is aimed primarily at the IAEA and Euratom, under whose supervision the control over the non-proliferation of nuclear fuels lies. It is not by accident that the magazine *Der Spiegel* in its latest edition concentrates on this aspect. *Der Spiegel* tries to popularize the assertion that every year, huge amounts of fissionable materials slip past the record-keeping of the IAEA, enough to build dozens of atomic bombs. And, from the circle of Volker Hauff, one hears that something new has to be worked out regarding the IAEA.

The Hanover-based *Allgemeine Zeitung* complains that the "nuclear have-nots" can procure nuclear know-how and nuclear material, because in the "highly industrialized countries," there is a reluctance to exert stricter controls. Also indicative is an editorial in *Business Week* of Jan. 11, which asserts, "The good news on nuclear arms is that President Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachov have agreed, for the first time in history, to cut back U.S. and Soviet arsenals of nuclear Euromissiles. The bad news is that it is too late to stop the spread of such weapons to the Third World."

It is to be supposed that the "German nuclear scandal" is only the first of a chain of scandals in whose wake peaceful nuclear technology in Western Europe will be more tightly drawn into Soviet curbs.

In the framework of the INF Treaty, which supposedly brings so many new "chances for verification," the following may be forecast. In the future, only the superpowers will possess the technology of the full nuclear fuel cycle. The corresponding plants in other countries will be closed down. These are mainly proposals which were already under consideration in the period of the Jimmy Carter administration. The German "nuclear scandal" has revealed what kind of bludgeons are ready, in case institutions like the IAEA and Euratom don't want to play along with this scenario.