

Koeberg: South Africa's ill-starred nuclear power plant

The plant has been plagued by political ANC terrorists and now by professional Greenpeace agitation. One has to ask whether the government is stable enough to support the modern regulatory infrastructure that power generation requires.

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Koeberg has been plagued by controversy in recent months but this is nothing new for South Africa's only nuclear power station which has been a target for saboteurs, anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists for nearly a quarter of a century.

Koeberg was indeed the target of sabotage 24 years ago and not necessarily in the last few months when a loose bolt damaged a generator.

Public Enterprises Minister Alec Erwin attributed the loose bolt to sabotage, only to deny later that he had said this.

But back in 1982, members of his party, the then banned African National Congress, did sabotage Koeberg – not long before it was due to open.

While it was still under construction, members of the ANC's armed wing Mkhonto Sizwe planted limpet mines at the unfinished power station. Four blasts rocked Koeberg over two days, causing damage estimated at R500-million and delaying the commissioning of the plant for 18 months.

The ANC issued a statement from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania saying the attack was intended "as a salute to all our fallen heroes and imprisoned comrades, including those buried in Maseru" which referred to a number of ANC members killed in a raid by the then South African Defence Force. Two of the saboteurs were granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1999.

Koeberg also got into trouble with the authorities for pumping contaminated dead fish and large sharks from their cooling water outlet into the sea.

The workers had been warned not to eat the fish but a spokesperson at the time assured a reporter that the fish, while contaminated, were not radioactive.

There were a number of attempts to delay the "switch-on", one of which involved what was described as an "amazing public row" between the City of Cape Town and Eskom over its emergency measures in the event of a nuclear accident.

The city's medical officer Dr RJ Coogan accused Eskom of "absolute naivety" in that their emergency plans took into account only people living within a 16km radius of Koeberg.

The plan stated that "basic precautions include taking shelter inside closed-up houses to avoid radiation, taking stable iodine tablets and, in extreme cases, conducting a mass evacuation in a fleet of buses and shared private transport.

Somewhat alarmingly, these emergency measures, which Eskom provided in 1982, are nearly identical to those given by the National Nuclear Regulator to Weekend Argus a week ago, 24 years later, and which Coogan found so inadequate that he petitioned the Atomic Energy Corporation to hold back Koeberg's operating licence.

A newspaper editorial soon after also poured scorn on the emergency measures. It said: "Part of the 'plan' is that listeners should stay tuned to the SABC for emergency announcements." But it asked: "What listeners? What SABC? What emergency? Man, after that first puff, the emergency is over!"

It went on to say in good old Cape tradition, that they'll hang up a sign somewhere on Sir Lowry's Pass. "As tourists peer across the space where Cape Town now is, they will have their pictures taken against a signboard which will tell the world where we all are. It will read: 'Gone Fission'."

There have been security breaches at Koeberg, including two jobseekers getting within "spitting distance" of the nuclear reactors without being challenged for permits or identification while the plant was being built.

Koeberg eventually went on stream on April, 14, 1984 but just over a year later was dramatically shut down because of a "nuclear alert" when metal tags were found embedded in steel pipes. It was reported at the time that the small metal tags, costing a few cents, had knocked out the R3,000-million power station and "triggered the most expensive piece of detective work in South African history".

After investigators eventually found the fault, Eskom was "granted permission to bring the twin-reactor station back into the national grid with one reactor in time for the higher winter demand."

Then in 1993 Koeberg was eyed by members of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging as a target, but their plot was foiled.

It was reported that police were probing allegations that right-wing sympathisers working at the power station would mastermind the sabotage bid.

FW de Klerk was state president at the time and his assistant was quoted in the press as saying that the "lunatic fringe" planning such attacks were "daydreamers" and "unprofessional with weak planning."

There were also reports in 1994 that the ANC wanted to close Koeberg and use the land for low-cost housing.

And an ANC conference on a nuclear policy for a democratic South Africa in the same year recommended that no more nuclear power stations be built in the country.

Tony Stott, who is still an Eskom spokesperson, responded at the time that closing down Koeberg prematurely would cost thousands of millions of rands, "money which could be better spent on electrification and housing".

The most recent security lapse was in 2002 when Greenpeace environmental activists launched a daring dawn "raid" on Koeberg from the sea in inflatable dinghies.

Six of them scaled the five-storey-high seawater cooling pumphouse to unfurl banners protesting against South Africa's use of nuclear power.

Greenpeace nuclear **professional activist** campaigner Mike Townsley told Weekend Argus at the time that the lapse in security was particularly frightening in a post-September 11 world.

He said it should never have been so simple to get into a nuclear power station.

"That is another reason we should not have such a facility – it's vulnerable to attack."

But Eskom denied security had been breached. Their spokeswoman Carin de Villiers said Koeberg's security personnel had been on hand to ensure any further access to the power station was prohibited.

Twelve of the activists were arrested but were soon released on a warning.