

Sellafield faces criminal charges

Very visible people with big pockets ... or so the opponents think.

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Criminal charges are to be brought against the Sellafield Nuclear power plant over a radioactive leak which went undiscovered for months, the Health and Safety Executive has said.

The facility's owner, British Nuclear Group Sellafield Ltd, is charged with breaching conditions regarding the safe storage of radioactive materials.

The decision follows the discovery of 18,257 gallons (83 cubic metres) of radioactive liquor inside a protected area of the Thorp reprocessing plant in April last year.

Two managers were suspended after the leak of acid containing uranium and plutonium leaked from a pipe inside the shielded area of the processing plant.

The liquor leaked into a stainless steel-lined cell with 1.5m thick concrete walls and was discovered on April 19, 2005. HSE officials said there is no current evidence of any harm to workers or the public.

The facility remains closed and both managers have now been reinstated following an internal inquiry. It is thought the fluid may have been leaking for several months before it was uncovered, said a Sellafield spokeswoman.

A statement released by the HSE read: "The prosecution follows a detailed investigation by HSE's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate into a leak of radioactive liquor inside a heavily shielded facility at the Thermal Oxide Reprocessing Plant (Thorp).

"HSE was notified of the incident on April 20, 2005. HSE has applied to the courts for summonses alleging that BNGSL breached three conditions attached to the Sellafield site licence granted under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965 (as amended)."

The Sellafield spokeswoman added: "The company has fully co-operated with the Nuclear Installation Inspectorate (NII) throughout its investigation and continues to make good progress against the measures needed to enable the Thorp facility to become operational again subject to regulations."

She added that it would be inappropriate to comment further as the case was the subject of legal proceedings. A legal hearing has been scheduled for June 8 at Whitehaven Magistrates Court in Cumbria.