



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

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MEDIA ADVISORY – for immediate release, 15th September 2011

BBC Horizon Fukushima programme – where's the balance and the right to reply?

The Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) has submitted a joint letter of complaint in conjunction with a number of other influential organisations to the BBC over a 'Horizon' documentary on the Fukushima disaster and the safety of nuclear power (1).

The complaint has been signed by a number of groups concerned around the development of new nuclear power in the UK. The documentary was fronted by Professor of Nuclear Physics at Surrey University, Jim Al-Khalili, and showed pictures of the damage of Fukushima and interviews with evacuees as well as wider considerations over the effects of radiation on health, the potential benefits of developing thorium reactors and ways to reduce the highly active radioactive elements contained in many waste products through a process of 'transmutation', and therefore providing a potential long-term solution for dealing with such waste.

The groups contend the documentary was insufficiently balanced and did not provide any attempt to interview distinguished international radiation scientists who would have given a more nuanced view of the 'limited' health effects of the Fukushima and the Chernobyl disasters, as claimed in the documentary. The complaint is also concerned that the BBC has repeated the same editorial mistakes as it did in the production of a Radio 4 documentary on the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster (2) – that it is actually the fear of radiation, and not necessarily the radiation itself, that is the main problem after such a disaster.

Other points made in the documentary:

- A lack of balance to the point of apparent bias – this was first and foremost a narrow opinion piece and not a balanced documentary.
- Much was made in the documentary that few people have actually died in either the Fukushima or the Chernobyl disaster. Evidence of epidemiological tests from the Chernobyl disaster, from the Three Mile Island and Windscale accidents suggests serious long-term health problems and cancer inductions that occur later on in life and can be passed on to future generations.
- Professor Al-Khalili reported the IAEA initial findings that it was a combination of the earthquake and the tsunami that led to the Fukushima reactor disaster. However, as reported in 'The Independent' following interviews with Fukushima workers, there are strong claims that critical external piping on the reactors had been inadequately repaired following a complaint made by the Japanese nuclear regulator a week before the disaster. It has been suggested that it was the earthquake that sparked the radiation leak, and the tsunami then greatly exacerbated it. Radiation alarms were also reported as going off **before** the tsunami.
- Professor Al-Khalili makes much out of the age of the Fukushima reactors. There are existing UK reactors of a similar age that are still in operation and which have been given recent life extensions, yet no comment is made of whether these should remain open.
- Professor Al-Khalili also made no mention of the potential effect of the Fukushima disaster on the marine environment or on the long-term local food chain. Early evidence suggests major long-term problems in both areas.

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- Professor Al-Khalili drew a diagram of the 'linear no threshold model' but drew it incorrectly as the curve should have gone the opposite way due to the health effects increasing rapidly in young people.
- There is no attempt made to interview those who challenge the results of the UN WHO 'Chernobyl Forum' on the long-term effects of this disaster. There is no scientific consensus around the effects of low level radiation on health.
- Professor Al-Khalili gives much emphasis to the possible development of thorium reactors in the future. Again, there is no opportunity for those who would have reasonable concerns around the development of such reactors to be given the opportunity to provide a counter-opinion.
- Professor Al-Khalili asserts that the method of dealing with high level radioactive waste is to develop a deep-underground geologically suitable repository. No actual route for 'disposing' of such waste currently exists in the UK.
- Finally, Professor Al-Khalili puts great emphasis on experiments in Grenoble that may break down and 'transmute' some of the most highly radioactive elements contained in radioactive waste to reduce their 'half-life'. He does not though mention how early and embryonic such research is, how expensive it is, or makes any mention of the UK's existing £100 billion radioactive waste legacy that the UK taxpayer is having to fund.

The groups who have signed up to this complaint conclude this documentary is unbalanced and leaves no specific right to reply. The letter of complaint is also submitted within a wider debate initiated by the Chief of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Margaret Khan, who has said independent research on the health impacts of radiation must be pursued without being influenced by the nuclear industry (3).

NFLA Chair Bailie George Regan says:

"I am very disturbed with what I see as an apparent lack of balance with this documentary, which seemed to me to full of loaded pro-nuclear comments that were at best valued judgments. It is high time this sensitive and important debate was dealt with fairly by the BBC and both sides of the debate given sufficient, fair and equal treatment. I hope and expect the BBC to take on board our comments and provide an adequate right to reply."

Ends

For interviews contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary on 07771 930196.

Notes for editors:

(1) The text of the complaint is attached with this media release.

(2) The text of the May complaint to the BBC is also attached with this media release.

(3) See: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/scitech/article1051210.ece/WHO-backs-independent-radiation-research>, May 5th 2011.

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