

Three Mile Island press conference, Governor Thornburgh and Harold Denton (Nuclear Regulatory Commission), and Press Secretary Paul Critchhow, Saturday night, March 31, 1979 (13:46)

>> Denton: One significant development today was a considerable beefing up of the capabilities to respond to contingencies. The president has made available considerable resources of the government to provide for contingency plans. For example, the plant received today from the federal government about a quarter-of-a-million dollars worth of lead bricks, and these are some of the trucks bringing in lead for shielding. We're making available -- We're bringing in two mechanical robots, not because there's any planned use, but just to have them for contingency backup. We've contacted the navy, and there's a possibility we'll be bringing in four 2 1/2 megawatt diesel generators in case there's a loss of off-site power at the site between now and the time of cold shutdown. So, we're attempting to get to the site all the equipment that might be needed in the event of any foreseeable contingencies. The licensee is also doing the same kind of thing and is bringing in package and capability to store both radioactive gases and liquids in the event it becomes necessary.

>> Reporter: Who will eventually pay for all of this -- the government or the company?

>> Denton: I don't know.

>> Reporter: Any estimate of what it will cost?

>> Denton: No, I don't.

>> Reporter: How would those lead bricks be used?

>> Denton: They'll be used to provide shielding around the hottest spots in the plant now.

>> Reporter: Mr. Denton, is there any knowledge of the typical process?

>> Reporter: There's no danger right now, you're saying. Can you tell us what dangers, potential dangers, lie ahead?

>> Denton: Well, there -- You know, we've gotten into this before. What if everything fails, what danger lies ahead? I think the reason we're here and we have all this equipment is to take those

actions as soon as we can to get the reactor below the temperature of boiling water, get it down to 170 degrees in a cold status, and that's the whole focus of the efforts in the plant.

>> Reporter: But can you tell us just -- if all that work doesn't succeed, what -- Just so we don't misunderstand each other, what is it that could happen?

>> Denton: Well, like I've said before -- Well, you know, if all systems eventually fail, and you lose all the water in the core, you have a core meltdown.

>> Reporter: Mr. Denton, from your knowledge of this hydrogen-reduction process, how long should it take to reduce this bubble to manageable size? Is it possible?

>> Denton: The scatter in the data on reducing the bubble size -- You may recall that this morning there was some controversy over how much the bubble had diminished. If you take the very highest data point for bubble size and you take one of the lower points for bubble size, you get one number. If you look at kind of the average trend, you get another number. I guess we estimate that the bubble is down 10% or 15% over the past 24 hours or so, but during this time, this process I'm describing was not in operation full time. I've asked the applicant to keep the venting of the pressurizer going all night, and it's going right now, and to continue to make periodic measurements throughout the night as to how effective it's been. So, I think sometime tomorrow I'll be able to give you a much better feel for what really changed.

>> Reporter: Can we get some range of numbers tonight?

>> Denton: No, being an indirect measurement, there's a lot of scatter in the data, and in order to get an accurate measurement, you have to make a big change in pressure, such as 50 pounds.

>> Reporter: Governor Thornburgh, have you received any figures on an approximate number of people who would have left this area? A number, too, how many people are being cared for in public shelters?

>> Thornburgh: No.

>> Reporter: We asked you this question yesterday, and you didn't know, Governor. I'm wondering why you don't have these figures available.

>> Thornburgh: Well, the figures with respect to individuals who are being cared for are approximately 145 at Hershey and 26 at York. I don't want to be held to the exact number figures. The number of people who have left the area is a little hard to come by. I don't know how on Earth you would ever find out, other than by taking a census.

>> Reporter: As we drive down through Middletown and the river communities there, those of us not being familiar with the area, we are told that it appears that a significant number -- amount of the population has left. Would you agree to that?

>> Thornburgh: I don't know. I think what we're concerned about is the management of the public health and safety problems that may be created for those people who are in the area. The statistics of who may have left are somewhat secondary. I have heard that a number of people have voluntarily left the area for one reason or another, but our principal concern is the health and the safety of those people who are in the area now, and our plans for any possible need to evacuate are made with those people in mind.

>> Reporter: Could you give us some idea what those plans are? Could you give us some idea what those plans are?

>> Thornburgh: Well, the plans obviously call for an orderly removal from the area of people who might be in some jeopardy so far as their health and safety go. The plans are set forth in considerable detail with the appropriate county officials for the mustering of vehicles, the opening of transportation routes, the providing of shelter, food, medical care at alternate sites, particular emphasis on any need to move people that might be already infirm in some way. The plans are being constantly reviewed by our emergency-management people and the federal people who are on hand and particular members of my staff who have been working around the clock to ensure that any gaps in the system are made up and that we're operational in the event that that contingency occurs. But I think again it's important to emphasize that we have no present plans to carry out any evacuation based on the situation as Mr. Denton informed me of it this evening.

>> Reporter: Governor, do you expect state government operations to be normal Monday or most people to be gone Monday?

>> Thornburgh: I don't know. Certainly I'm going to come to work on Monday.

>> Reporter: Governor, some of the people in those towns complain that they have brought their children out and they have come back because they're worried about looting in their houses. And they say that in other natural disasters, the National Guard comes out, and they wonder why the National Guard is not there protecting their homes to allow them to evacuate now.

>> Thornburgh: I -- To my knowledge, there has been no single incident of looting reported to any of our emergency-management people. Local police remain in place. Our state police is at the ready if there are any needs that arise to assist. But I don't know of any looting.

>> Reporter: Governor, are there any measurable radioactive iodine getting to the atmosphere?

>> Denton: I -- With all the samples that have now been taken, there is still no indication of any radio nuclides in the environment other than the noble gases. There was that one original sample that showed iodine. There has not been any sample since that time that showed any fission product other than noble gases.

>> Reporter: Mr. Denton, my question then -- Do you have a current report on the temperature and radiation levels inside the containment vessel?

>> Denton: No, I don't, sir.

>> Unidentified person: Thank you very much.

>> Unidentified person: Thank you.

[Indistinct conversations]

Critchlow, Press Secretary: We're very, very disturbed about the company. Very disturbed about some of the company's statements. We think they have been very irresponsible.

Reporter Has anybody confronted -- What's his name? -- Herbein?

Critchlow: I think the White House has confronted Herbein about it.

Reporter: Personally? Who in the White House? Do you know?

Critchlow: I think the president, some of his top aides have. Or at least have confronted the company.

Reporter: Well, what did they confront him with? Are they saying that they're lying or that they don't know what the hell they're talking about? I mean, they have physicists working for them.

Critchlow: I'm thinking we'll see the NRC speaking for the company. I think he announced today the fact that he would not -- that the company would not make any more statements, that all their statements would be made through the NRC.

Reporter: One more question about overreaction. The 10-mile-limit advisory, people stay indoors, lasted less than 24 hours. Does that mean that the danger at the time it was issued has decreased or that the governor overreacted by going with it? It's got to be one or the other, I would say.

Critchlow: No comment.

Reporter: Paul, I understand there are three NRC information officers in Harrisburg. Do you know where they are? They don't seem to be...

Critchlow: I know where one of them is. One of them has been operating out of my office.

Reporter: Why have very few people who I've talked to been aware that the NRC has press capability in town now?

Critchlow: Because Mr. Denton has been authorized to be the chief spokesman, you know, on-site here, and he has the director of public information with him at all times, Joe Fouchard.

Reporter: He's the one that's in the office?

Critchlow: Yes, he's been in on all these meetings.

Reporter: Paul, can we count on one source of information from now on?

Critchlow: We -- The governor is trying to be the source of all information relating to governmental activities or relating to impact on the civilian population. NRC -- I cannot tell NRC what to do.

Reporter: Could you suggest?

Critchlow: We have been working with the White House to try to develop a better-coordinated system for getting information out from all the federal agencies.

Reporter: Do you have any kind of game plan at all for tomorrow yet?

Critchlow: I think that Mr. Denton will probably hold a press briefing possibly around midday, probably in Middletown. That's the present plan.

Reporter: Does the company plan to be at the press conference because the White House said, "Why don't you stop in?"

Critchlow: I think you ought to ask the White House.

Reporter: Thank you, Paul.

Reporter: Thanks, Paul.