New development in the Philippines:

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Revived interest in nuclear power

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In August 2007, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo approved the proposal by Angelo Reyes, the new Secretary of the Department of Energy (appointed July 2007), to study the immediate utilization of nuclear power.

In September 2007, Secretary Reyes revealed during a budget hearing in the Philippine Congress that the Philippine DOE is seeking the assistance of the IAEA to determine whether the Philippine Nuclear Power Plant (PNPP-1), popularly known as the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP), could be revived.

The PNPP-1 is a 620 MWe two-loop Westinghouse PWR that started construction in 1976 and was completed in 1985, but has never been operated.

On 11 February 1986, the public hearings had ended and the PNPP-1 was waiting for an operation permit to be issued by the Philippine Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC, which later became the PNRI) when the Philippine Supreme Court restrained the licensing proceedings.

The basis for the restraining order was the alleged pre-judgment by PAEC that the PNPP-1 was safe as stated in pamphlets that had been issued by the PAEC's public information unit. (The PAEC then, as the PNRI now, had a dual role of regulating and promoting nuclear energy.) The PAEC was ordered to re-open public hearings.

On 25 February 1986, people power overthrew Ferdinand Marcos and Corazon Aquino became the Philippine president.

On 25 April 1986, the Chernobyl accident occurred.

On 1 October 1986, President Aquino officially decided in an Executive Order not to operate the PNPP-1, with the national government taking over its assets and assuming its financial obligations.

President Aquino also ordered that the PNPP-1 be preserved (mothballed) until its final disposal or utilization has been decided.

The PNPP-1 cost at least US$ 2.1 billion to build. The cost was increased by the Three-Mile Island accident in 1979, which caused the suspension of construction until 1981 to add lessons-learned modifications to the plant design. There were also allegations that the plant was overpriced from the start because of corruption in the Marcos government of the time.

In April 2007, the Philippine government announced that the foreign loans that financed the PNPP-1 had been fully paid.

Through the years, there have been sporadic proposals to convert the PNPP-1 into a plant fueled by coal or natural gas. None of those proposals have prospered, perhaps because the conversion would not have been economical.

Until this year, the government has never considered operating the PNPP-1 as it was originally designed.

Possible impacts on the PRR-1 and the PNRI of the revival of nuclear power in the Philippines:

There may be pressure to return the PRR-1 to operation to support a nuclear power program instead of decommissioning.

If it is shown that it is not practical to return the PRR-1 to operation, the pressure could be turned around to support the construction of a new research reactor at another site.

The revival of a nuclear power program will accelerate the movement to separate the regulatory power from the PNRI. The nuclear law being drafted by the PNRI (with the assistance of the IAEA) will be more quickly put on the table.

It will come to public attention that the PNRI is not capable of supporting a nuclear power program with its present resources, even in education and training alone if its regulatory function is separated.

The attention could be used to support a build-up in the resources being given to the PNRI by the Philippine government. On the other hand, the anti-nuclear movement will use this lack of capability as an argument against the revival of a nuclear power program.