

Swedish authorities test nuclear strategy through accident simulations

Review comes after report criticising security at Sweden's power stations

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Some 70 local and national, public and private organisations, involving about 6,000 people, are taking part in an exercise to test the response to a nuclear accident in Sweden. The simulation centres on the south-eastern Kalmar area and is divided into three stages. The first two were held last week.

The context for the scenario is a cold winter with extra demands on the electricity supply. This causes anxiety in the community well before things go wrong at the Oskarshamn nuclear power station. The exercise is designed to assess the handling of the short- and long-term consequences of a possible accident.

At 6.19am last Wednesday, the Västervik Tidningen daily explains, Pierre Stridh, the head of civil defence at Västervik, received a call warning him that the cooling system on one of the reactors had failed and that there was an impending risk of a nuclear incident. Stridh opened a special file and started making phone calls.

In Enköping, a town north-west of Stockholm, officials playing the part of local people fired questions at participants in the exercise, setting in motion new tasks. By midday the situation had deteriorated, a fire having broken out at the plant.

The project leader, Daniel Geisler, praised the professionalism displayed by participants. "We were asked whether Västervik could take senior citizens in the event of an evacuation. Rather than just answering yes, officials started phoning old people's homes in the town to check."

On the second day of stage one it was cold, there were heating problems and people were increasingly worried, casting doubt on the news provided by the media. One of the challenges facing participants was to try to keep control of the situation using social networks. Many meetings were held to co-ordinate these efforts.

"We want to see whether the warning system works, how it stands the test of time, how much the response team can put up with and what problems occur when the crisis lasts 48 hours non-stop," says Nina Åkermark, the exercise's spokesperson. The second stage of the simulation takes place this week and aims to gauge the impact of the accident on the community. The final stage, in April, takes the form of a seminar to report the results.

At the end of January, Sweden's Radiation Safety Authority (SSM) published a report severely criticising security in nuclear power plants, after Greenpeace campaigners entered the power station at Forsmark last summer and climbed a reactor.

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