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Mexico to check safety of nuclear power plant

MEXICO CITY, June 6 (Reuters) - Mexico said on Tuesday it planned to thoroughly inspect the nation's sole nuclear power plant, which environmentalists say is on the verge of causing catastrophe for Mexico and the United States.

The announcement came on the same day that Greenpeace released a damning report on the Laguna Verde plant, on Mexico's Gulf coast some 450 miles (725 km) south of Texas, citing a number of technical failures that suggested it was close to collapse.

"We have agreed that for everyone's peace of mind, the CFE will allow an independent technical inspection of the Laguna Verde plant," Alfredo Elias Ayub, director general of Mexico's Federal Electricity Commission (CFE), told reporters.

Elias said he had met with Greenpeace before making the decision, which came months after the group called for the inspection and claimed a series of accidents and cover-ups proved the plant was unsafe.

Bad organization and maintenance at Laguna Verde mean it is "on the verge of institutional failure," according to a report by British consulting engineers Large and Associates that Greenpeace distributed. It described institutional failure as a complete collapse of the reactor's systems.

The study, based on a World Association of Nuclear Operators (WANO) inspection, compared the plant to Ukraine's Chernobyl, the site of the world's worst ever nuclear accident. The plant is just 175 miles (275 km) east of Mexico City, one of the most populated cities on Earth.

WANO findings, compiled in a confidential report obtained by Greenpeace, were also sent to U.S. specialist David Lochbaum, who said the plant should be closed for at least 18 months for maintenance.

WANO is an international organization set up after Chernobyl, the site of the world's worst civil nuclear disaster in 1986, to monitor nuclear safety in member nations. It visited the plant at the request of the Mexican government in November 1999, the newspaper Reforma reported.

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"The longer the plant is open, the higher the risk of a serious nuclear accident the nation won't be able to recover from," said Alejandro Calvillo, director of Greenpeace Mexico.

A Greenpeace spokeswoman said that in the event of a disaster, it would be a matter of hours before the fallout reached the southern shores of the United States.

The CFE's Elias said he was happy to have an audit by an independent group of consultants. "The CFE is confident that Laguna Verde will pass the independent consultant's tests," said Elias.

He declined to answer any questions but said the timetable and other details would be made available after a meeting next week with Greenpeace.

Calvillo said the plant would continue to operate through the inspection, which would last three weeks. He estimated it would take two months to find a firm to carry out the study.

The plant will be inspected no matter who wins the July 2 presidential election, said Calvillo, adding that a Greenpeace survey showed most of the candidates were in favor of it.

Laguna Verde, in the Gulf of Mexico state of Veracruz, began operations in 1989 and generated 3.67 percent of Mexico's electric power during the third quarter of 1999, the latest period for which data are available.