

Germany and Chernobyl

End of the nuclear programme?

Hamburg

THE cloud whose changing direction carried radioactivity from Chernobyl over Western Europe last month has changed the political climate in West Germany. Fallout has become a national issue which will affect the regional (*länder*) elections due in the next few months and even the federal elections next January.

The general confusion in the days following the accident has left its mark. Chancellor Helmut Kohl, in Tokyo for the economic summit, at first reacted calmly, saying that the accident was characteristic of planned economies and could not have happened in West Germany. By the time, six days after the accident, that fallout reached West Germany, Kohl (still in Tokyo) was urging further expansion of nuclear energy in West Germany even as the first warnings against drinking fresh milk were being published.

Conflicting information was given out from several sources. The Minister of the Interior, Friedrich Zimmermann (CSU), was explaining on television that contamination from a reactor 2,000 miles away could not occur while the first radioactive rain began to fall. Officials of the federal and *länder* governments gave out contra-



Police clash with demonstrators at Brokdorf last week

dictory advice. In Bavaria, the most affected of the *länder*, the right-wing government played down the problem for the first few days, but in Munich, with its SPD (Social Democrat) city government, people were told to avoid contact with soil or grass.

The federal government said that people should not drink milk whose radioactivity was more than 500 Bq per litre, but in some *länder* the limit was only half as much, while Hesse fixed it at 20 Bq per litre. In many cities, kindergartens and playing-fields were closed and the marketing of green salad and spinach forbidden. Farmers were forced by the police to destroy vegetables or, as in Nordrhein-Westfalen, to keep cattle off pasture. Geiger counters were sold out after a few days.

Psychoanalysts claim to have identified a novel fear among the people of West Germany, whose dread has been described by the newspaper *Bild* as "Atom-Angst" (nuclear fear).

The political consequences are signalled by the latest opinion polls, to which the political parties have begun to adapt their nuclear policies. The Greens, who have always wanted an end to nuclear construction, now demand that nuclear plants should be abandoned. The Social Democrats (SPD), conscious of the figures, have adopted the slogan "the beginning of the end" and have appointed a committee under Volker Hauff, a former federal minister of research, to suggest by the summer how the nuclear programme should be run down.

Public opinion has changed dramatically. The percentage of those wanting no further nuclear reactors to be built grew in a few days from 46 per cent to 69 per cent and reached a peak of 83 per cent. In Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony), where there is an election on 15 June, the opinion polls put CDU (Christian Democrats) and SPD almost equal with 43 per cent of popular support, compared with 51 per cent for CDU and only 37 per cent for SPD at the 1982 elections. The same poll gives FDP (Free Democrats) less than the 5 per cent required for representation in the regional parliament. The Greens have increased their support to 10 per cent from 6.5 per cent in 1982.

This week's elections in Niedersachsen could have national consequences. If SPD in coalition with the Greens (as in Hesse) is able to oust the present CDU chief minister, the government coalition could lose its majority in the Bundesrat in Bonn.

SPD is looking further ahead, to the federal elections in January 1987. It has already said that it would probably stop the DM7,000 million fast reactor project at Kalkar, but Johannes Rau, the SPD candidate for the chancellorship next year who is at present chief minister of Nordrhein-Westfalen, where Kalkar is situated, has already ensured that the builders of the project will be forced to give it up by demanding new safety measures.

With the Kalkar reactor apparently doomed, attention has turned to the reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf in Bavaria, the technical need for which turns on the manufacture of plutonium for the fast reactor. There have been violent clashes at the plant between police and demonstrators. The Austrian government has also demanded that West Germany should give up the project, but has been told not to interfere. Both Bonn and the CSU Bavarian government seem committed to the DM6,000 million project, al-

though that may change before the autumn's election in Bavaria, whose farmers have been most affected by fallout.

West Germany's present use of nuclear power is impressive. There are 19 nuclear plants producing 16,000 MW of electricity, or 36 per cent of the total. A further seven plants (including 300 MW Kalkar) are due to be commissioned by 1990, equivalent to 50 per cent of generating capacity. In North Germany, around Hamburg, no less than 70 per cent of electricity generation is nuclear.

Meanwhile, the SDP-Green coalition in Hesse has taken up the question of how to implement the Greens' demand that nuclear generation should be halted. A paper by the first regional environment minister (see *Nature* 321, 299; 1986), Joschka Fischer, accepts that there would be higher electricity prices and more air pollution during a transitional period, and has been called utopian by most politicians. But it won support last week from a surprising source, the director of the huge energy supplier Preussag Electra: a director, Hermann Kramer, said that the calculations are essentially correct.

Elsewhere, the CDU government of Schleswig-Holstein has delayed the start of the construction of the twentieth reactor planned at Brokdorf, near Hamburg, at least until after this week's elections in neighbouring Niedersachsen, while Ernst Albrecht has announced the creation of a new centre of solar energy research.

The federal government is softening its arguments. Chancellor Kohl is no longer asking for more nuclear power stations, while many SDU and FDP politicians suggest a "pause for reflection", while insisting that a halt to the nuclear programme would go too far and would not in any case make West Germany safe from nuclear accidents because there are at present a total of 66 nuclear plants in surrounding countries.

A reminder of that truth came last week, when the *Oko-Institut* of Darmstadt announced that there had been a small release of radioactivity from its high-temperature reactor at Hamm-Uentrop, previously thought one of the safest. It seems that the leak was swamped by the fallout from Chernobyl, but the Nordrhein-Westfalen government has ordered the reactor closed until the company produces a full report on the safety of the system.

Meanwhile, the Bonn government has conceded one of the first demands of the Greens, and has appointed Walter Wallmann (CDU) as the federal government's Minister for the Environment, Nature Protection and Reactor Safety. The opposition regards the appointment as a clear admission of the mistakes of recent weeks. No issue has so much stirred West Germany as the fallout from Chernobyl.

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