

NUCLEAR THREAT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS; METSAMOR TO CONTINUE OPERATING

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The Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) was built in Armenia by the Soviet government in 1977, but it was shut down after an earthquake in 1988. The NPP was partially reactivated in 1995. It is located 30 km away from Yerevan and only 16 km away from the Turkey-Armenia border. Metsamor meets 35-40% of the Armenias total energy needs, therefore it has been operating despite the warnings by the European Commission, local NGOs, and international community. The NPP poses risk not only for Armenia and Turkey, but also for the whole region and beyond. As the world experienced two major nuclear disasters already, Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi, another possible disaster should be avoided at all costs, since such experience has shown that such disasters have far reaching, horrible effects that last for decades.

The latest Progress Report of European Commission (EC) on Armenia (2015) underlines the threat that the Metsamor NPP poses by stating that; the early closure and decommissioning of the Metsamor NPP remain a key objective for the EU and under the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan. Since the power plant cannot be upgraded to meet current internationally recognized nuclear safety standards, it should be closed as soon as possible. The report continues to comment on Armenian governments decision to extend Metsamor NPPs operations until 2026, stating that the stress test report of Armenia received from the EC will be reviewed during 2015.[1] Additionally, while focusing on the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership, policies on supplying electricity need and projects in Armenia, the EC report puts forth similar goals; with regard to nuclear energy, the early closure and decommissioning of the Medzamor nuclear power plant remains a key objective for the EU and the ENP Action Plan.[2]

Ignoring the local and international calls, the Armenian government has decided to keep the Metsamor NPP operational. In the past couple of years, there were plans for a new nuclear power plant to be built, which was going to replace the Metsamor NPP, but due to

financial shortages, the plan was never actualized. On the contrary, the Armenian government decided to extend Metsamors operation date in 2014. Also on May 2015, the Armenian parliament approved the decision to cooperate with Russias Rosatom company on the planned extension of Metsamors operations until 2026 with 111 votes in favor, 1 against, and 3 abstaining.[3]

According to Armenian resources, a new and stronger generator and a turbine will be installed on the second power unit of the Metsamor NPP with Russias support; Russia will provide a loan of 270 million dollars and 30 million dollars in grants.[4] According to RIA Novosti - Russia's international news agency (RIA), Deputy Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of Armenia Areg Galstyan, at the IAEA conference held in Vienna on September, stated the following; "We have approximately 10 years to start the construction of the new energy unit on the same place where the Metsamor NPP is located. We are 100 percent sure that the block will use pressurized water reactor. We have one, maximum two years to make the final decision on choosing the type of project."[5] Even though EC reports keep warning Armenia about Metsamor and asking for its urgent closure, Armenia keeps delaying the construction of a new NPP and keeps Metsamor operating. The decision of keeping Metsamor is still on the agenda as we understand from Galstyans statement. Moreover, although Metsamor stands on a fault line, which doubles its threat for the region, Galstyan has stated that the new energy unit will be constructed on the same location with Metsamor. Minister of Energy of Turkey Berat Albayrak underlined the same threat by stating; Metsamor NPP, located in seismic zone, should be shut down. The world cannot risk another disaster like Chernobyl, warning the international community on the risks posed by the existing of Metsamor NPP at the IAEA conference in Vienna.[6]

There is a second dimension about the risks of Metsamor NPP. Choe Chong-dae, who is a columnist at The Korean Times, draws attention to nuclear safety in the region. Talking about smuggling of nuclear and radioactive waste materials by some Armenian citizens, Chong-dae recalls former Armenian Prime Minister Hrant Bagratyans claims that Armenia has created nuclear weaponry.[7] This is a serious claim made by a former high level Armenian official that should be taken seriously and investigated by the international community very carefully. Bagratyan stated that; Nuclear weapons are already created in Armenia, at a press conference on 29 April 2016 at the Armenian Media Center and added that Armenia has such potential.[8] According to various resources, nuclear safety stands on a very thin line and is in serious threat in the South Caucasus. In the same line with Chong-dae, various news agencies report about the smuggling of uranium materials from Armenia to other regions.[9]

Despite the abovementioned concerns and threats emanating from such a risk-prone nuclear power plant, Director General of the Metsamor NPP Movses Vardanyan told reporters that starting from November 26, Metsamor NPP will remain to be active.

Photo: Wikipedia

[1] Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Armenia Progress in 2014 and recommendations for actions, SWD (2015) 63 final, European Commission,

25.03.2015, http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/armenia-enp-report-2015_en.pdf

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ermenistan nükleer santrali 11 yıl daha kullanacak, Milliyet, 06.05.2015, http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ermenistan-nukleer-santrali-11-yil/dunya/detay/2054782/default.htm

[4] New generator and turbine to be installed at Armenian NPP, Arka News Agency, 12.10.2016, http://arka.am/en/news/technology/new_generator_and_turbine_to_be_installed_at_armenian_npp/

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[7] Choe Chong-dae, Nuclear facility in Armenia, The Korea Times, 12.09.2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2016/09/162_213984.html

[8] Georgi Gotev, Former Armenian PM says his country has nuclear weapons, 10.05.2016, https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/former-armenian-pm-says-his-country-has-nuclear-weapons/

[9] Ozge Nur Ogutcu, Metsamor And Regional Nuclear-Security In The South Caucasus, 14.06.2016, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/METSAMOR-AND-REGIONAL-NUCLEAR-SECURITY-IN-THE-SOUTH-CAUCASUS

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