

Paris, 20 September 1999

OLIS : **17-Sep-1999**

Dist. : **17-Sep-1999**

NEA/COM(99)8

**AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
SPONSORED BY THE NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENCY
ON CRITICALITY RISKS IN THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY OPENS TODAY**

The Sixth International Nuclear Criticality Safety Conference (ICNC '99), which opens today in Versailles, France, will examine the question of keeping criticality accident risks in the nuclear industry under control. This conference, which is organised by the French *Institut de protection et de sûreté nucléaire* (IPSN), and co-sponsored by the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) and the American Nuclear Society (ANS), will bring together over 260 participants from 25 countries. More than 200 scientific and technical papers will be presented.

Criticality accidents, i.e. the uncontrolled start of a chain reaction within fissile material such as uranium 235 and plutonium, may occur in laboratories and nuclear fuel cycle plants, as well as in research reactors and during transport of radioactive material, fuel assemblies and certain categories of radioactive waste.

Keeping the risk of a criticality accident under control consists of taking appropriate steps at the design and operation stages so as to avoid conditions which would lead to a spontaneous chain reaction. The ICNC '99 Conference will provide a forum for the analysis of the most recent developments in this field. In particular, during a special session on 22 September, with the participation of Russian scientists and engineers, lessons will be drawn from criticality accidents which have taken place in Russia, some of which were up to now little known to the international community.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Philippe Savelli, NEA Deputy Director for Science, Computing and Development, recalled that the NEA had expressed an interest in criticality safety as early as 1961. Since then, these issues have been the subject of broad-ranging international co-operation, notably through the NEA Science Committee. Mr. Savelli emphasised that, "If nuclear energy is to play an important role in our economies in the future, then the fissile materials must be handled safely over the whole nuclear fuel

./.

News Media Contact : Jacques de la Ferté - Tel. 33 (0)1 4524 1010 - Fax 33 (0)1 4524 1110
Enrico Sartori - Tel. 33 (0)1 4524 1072 - Fax 33 (0)1 4524 1110
e-mail : news.contact@nea.fr - web site: <http://www.nea.fr>

81578

cycle. Several fuel cycle options exist, and their advantages and disadvantages are being keenly debated at the technical, economical, political and public levels. In the coming years there will likely be further clarification of potential nuclear fuel cycle strategies as part of the general debate on sustainable development, each one with its specific needs in criticality safety... The objective is to pursue an accident-free goal, while keeping in mind the repercussions that a criticality excursion could have."

The conference is being held at the Palais des Congrès, Versailles, France on 20-24 September 1999. Press packages are available at the conference secretariat.