

Vatican official says Japan nuclear crisis signals global problem

VATICAN CITY - A Vatican official told members of the International Atomic Energy Agency that this year's nuclear disaster in Japan has raised new concerns about the safety of nuclear plants around the world.

In a speech at the agency's headquarters in Vienna Sept. 20, Monsignor Michael Banach questioned whether nuclear power plants should be built and operated in areas prone to earthquakes and whether plants that already exist in such areas should be shut down.

Last March, an earthquake and tsunami that claimed 24,000 lives in Japan triggered an explosion at a nuclear power plant in Fukushima that contaminated air and water with radioactive material. More than 200,000 people were evacuated from the area and the radioactive zone was said to be bigger than that created by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Mgsr. Banach, the Vatican's representative to the nuclear agency, commented on the repercussions from the nuclear meltdown.

"The nuclear crisis in Fukushima-Daiichi raises many basic questions which need to be addressed so as to improve the planning and management of nuclear power plants in accordance with the highest standards," he said.

"It revealed that the world is exposed to real and systematic risks, and not just hypothetical ones, with incalculable costs and the necessity of developing an international political coordination the likes of which have never been seen," he said.

The long-term effects of the disaster include economical, medical and rebuilding costs in one of Japan's richest agricultural areas.

Monsignor Banach asked members about properly maintaining current plants and destroying old plants.

“Does nuclear fission technology, or the construction of new atomic power plants, or the continued operation of existing ones exclude human error in its phases of design, normal and emergency operation?” he said.

“To all these questions, there must also be added those concerning political will, technical capacity and necessary finances in order to proceed to the dismantling of many old nuclear reactors,” he said.

In his speech, Monsignor Banach also mentioned the importance of preserving cancer-control programs enacted by member states and encouraged the agency to continue to pursue and strengthen these programs.