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Role of energy giants in UK

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The problems inside France's nuclear industry could not come at a worse time for Britain. They may be "anomalies", as some say, but they raise questions about the safety and efficiency of the giants Électricité de France (EDF) and Areva, entirely or largely state-owned.

EDF is in a row over 100 staff at the Tricastin plant being irradiated, but is also wrapping up talks on a £12bn deal to take over British Energy, the UK's only real nuclear generator.

Areva, under fire from regulators over uranium leaks from a treatment centre at a subsidiary, has been made a preferred bidder, with two other companies, to manage Sellafield, Britain's biggest complex.

EDF and Areva have been at the front of those arguing for Britain to build a new generation of nuclear plants in line with Gordon Brown's plan for low carbon energy

The UK government has managed to convince many sceptical Labour MPs they should bury their opposition to nuclear power, on the grounds that it is vital to halt climate change. That fragile support - and continued public concern - could melt in the face of evidence from France that its nuclear industry is not as safe as it should be.

Britain's nuclear industry has a fairly good track record but British Energy is struggling to maintain its ageing reactors - a series of breakdowns, or "outages" as managers call them, have gone unreported beyond the business news. Similarly, the Thorp and Magnox fuel reprocessing plants at Sellafield have had accidents and breakdowns making them unable to pay back their huge building costs and provide the necessary income to help decommission old plants.

Last week it emerged the cost estimate for cleaning up nuclear waste in the UK had risen by £10bn in one year. That increase is the same as the current cost of the 2012 Olympics - the finances of which have generated so much political heat.

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