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Energy Giant's Europe Chief Quits After Nuclear Scandal



Klaus Rauscher stepped down on Wednesday

Amid growing criticism of the company's handling of fires at two German nuclear plants, Vattenfall Europe's CEO resigned Wednesday. Government leaders meanwhile mulled the future of atomic energy.

Vattenfall Europe CEO Klaus Rauscher offered his resignation on Wednesday after the Brunsbüttel nuclear power plant had to be shut off for the third time in three weeks because of problems.

"Rauscher explained that it cannot be denied that the events of the past few weeks have tarnished the image of Vattenfall Europe," read a statement released by Vattenfall's supervisory board chief, Lars G. Josefsson. "Errors have been made for which he, as head of Vattenfall Europe, must bear responsibility."



Krümmel nuclear plant is still not back in operation

A fire in the company's nearby Krümmel nuclear power plant in June had started a series of problems that led to the firing of Vattenfall Europe's nuclear energy chief, Bruno Thomauske, on Monday.

Gradual disclosures since June 28, when electrical defects shut down the company's reactors at Krümmel and Brunsbüttel near Hamburg, have revealed that staff at Krümmel were in crisis as a fire raged in a transformer.

Neither reactor was damaged and no radioactivity was released, but Vattenfall -- and the whole nuclear industry in Germany -- suffered a public relations disaster.

The company said it was commissioning an independent inquiry by scientists and business experts with a budget of 5 million euros (\$6.8 million) to examine exactly what went wrong.

Ministers divided on what to do

German Economy Minister Michael Glos meanwhile sprang to the defense of the country's nuclear power stations on Wednesday,



Sigmar Gabriel, Angela Merkel and Michael Glos (from left)

saying that despite the recent problems, even the oldest plants were ahead of the rest of the world in terms of security.

"What's definite is that the reactors in operation are as safe as is humanly possible," Glos told German public television ZDF. "On this point, we in Germany are ahead", the minister said.

Glos also added that said that the safety of the power stations had nothing to do with their age.

German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the other hand had called for the oldest plants, which began operating in the early 1970s, to be shut down.

In return, the remaining operation time on these plants could be transferred to younger plants, but energy providers are not keen on doing so as the old ones operate much more profitably.

Merkel has no pity

Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has in the past supported a rethink of Germany's planned nuclear energy phase-out, said Wednesday that she could understand the public's concerns and its criticism of the nuclear industry.

"My pity for the industry is limited," she said, adding that she found Vattenfall's information policy "totally unacceptable.

"After all, dramatic errors were committed," Merkel said.

But the chancellor also said that the entire industry should not be stigmatized.

"I wouldn't generalize," she said. "It must not happen again."

DW staff (win)