

Nuclear survival: the NZ prospects

NEW ZEALAND has vastly more to fear after a nuclear war from lack of an effective bureaucracy than from radioactive fallout, according to a Planning Council report.

The report, made public today, says people have been too conditioned by horrifying projections of nuclear winter in the northern hemisphere to realise that New Zealanders would probably survive a nuclear war.

The report is based on a six-month study of the likely impact on New Zealand of a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere.

Radioactive fallout would most likely barely affect this country, it says. Instead, New Zealand would face post-nuclear ruination from massive unemployment, a surge of diseases coupled with vanishing medical supplies, an abrupt end to trade and consequent shortage of essential imports like mechanical parts, and from increased pollution and depletion of natural resources as people strived for self-sufficiency without adequate planning.

The main message of the report, funded by some of the French Government reparation money for the Rainbow Warrior bombing, is that New Zealand must formulate a comprehensive bureaucratic and civil defence response if it is to survive a nuclear war.

While New Zealanders would most likely survive the war, society would not survive without rigorous, far-sighted contingency planning. Currently there is none, and the Government must take responsibility, the report says.

Principal researcher Wren Green urges consideration of stockpiling, alternative farming and food processing and other contingency options, saying the impression that the human race would be destroyed — an impression imported from the nuclear-threatened northern hemisphere — is misleading, and has forestalled vital logistical planning.

Contrary to popular belief, there would be such a small amount of radioactive fallout reaching New Zealand, even if Australia was bombed, that there would be, say a 1 per cent rise in the cases of cancer over several decades. This is not a large number and they would not all be fatal," Dr Green said.

The report assumes New Zealand is not a nuclear target given there are many thousands of targets of greater strategic importance.

"Radioactive fallout does not spread evenly over the world in the way that people commonly think," Planning Council director Peter Rankin says. "New Zealand would only receive a minute per cent of global fallout because of weather patterns and the way radioactive fallout behaves."

Mr Rankin says it is important New Zealanders face the grim prospects of life after nuclear war.

"In some ways it's easier to do nothing about nuclear war if you think the human race will be destroyed than if

By JANE CLIFTON
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would have to face grim survival."

Sickness and disease emerge as probably the greatest post-nuclear risk to New Zealanders, given this country's dependence on imported pharmaceuticals. The health risk would rapidly become more acute through breakdown of water purifying and waste disposal processes. Epidemics of fatal diseases would be a certainty, and New Zealand would have to take tough decisions on whether to accept refugees, as they would likely import new diseases such as typhoid and cholera.

The report urges consideration of stockpiling medicines and even making New Zealand self-reliant in essential medicines.

Food production would also be in serious jeopardy. While the report says the northern hemisphere's devastating nuclear winter effects would not occur here, an average temperature drop of just a few degrees would deplete food production.

Also, radiation could contaminate milk supplies if southern Australia was a target.

The end of pharmaceutical imports would mean an increase in animal diseases, and a lack of imported chemicals and processing plant equipment would further curtail food output.

The report recommends consideration of seed stock, animal vaccine and essential trace element stockpiles, alternative farming practices, new crops and older, less technology-reliant methods of small-scale food processing.

The report says since there is yet no contingency plan for post-nuclear survival, New Zealand's authorities would not be able to cope with the crucial decisions to be made in the immediate crisis period. Worse, it would be too late to take the steps necessary for long-term survival.

Some of the contingency planning necessary has useful application outside the nuclear threat particularly alternative energy planning, the report says.

It urges the Government to initiate wide public and sectoral discussion and planning. The health sector, for instance, should help explore possibilities for ensuring essential medical supplies and maintaining a preventive public health system through the crisis. The finance sector could consider reaching agreement on procedures for maintaining some kind of monetary system in the possible absence of the electronic systems currently relied on.

The report says the highest priority must always be given to prevention of nuclear war. Public discussion about the part New Zealand can play in prevention