

# 'Safe' Soviet reactors being built in Cuba

Wash Times 10/20

By Lionel Martin  
REUTERS NEWS AGENCY

CIENFUEGOS, Cuba — The island nation of Cuba, only a hundred miles from populous southern Florida, is building Soviet-designed nuclear reactors which, its leaders insist, will be completely safe, even in the event of earthquakes, tidal waves or technological accidents.

The communist-ruled island, which has limited oil reserves, no coal and no sizable rivers, is constructing its first nuclear-powered, electricity-generating complex on its southern Caribbean Sea coast near the mouth of Cienfuegos Bay, renowned for its rich shrimp spawning grounds.

In all, four reactors will be built on the site, each producing about 417 megawatts of electricity — more than the entire electrical output of the nation in 1959, when Fidel Castro took over. The first two reactors are due to be completed in 1990; the others are to come on line by the end of the century.

According to a senior engineer working on the two-year-old project, Cuba modified the original Soviet designs for the power plant to add safeguards against radioactive leaks in the case of disasters ranging from natural catastrophes to airplane crashes.

The engineer, Pedro Gonzalez, told reporters, who recently visited the construction site, that the \$2.4-billion project had been approved by the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

Mr. Gonzalez said the cylindrical buildings housing the reactors will be topped by containment domes designed to prevent the escape of radioactivity into the air or sea in case of an accident. Domes will be able to withstand even the impact of an airplane crash, he said.

He added that the safety modi-

fications, which were made by Soviet designers in consultation with Cuban engineers, were completed well before the Chernobyl accident in the Soviet Ukraine last April, when a reactor explosion spewed radioactive material over wide areas of Europe and forced the evacuation of thousands of people from the immediate area.

Soviet authorities placed the major blame for that accident on human error, although Western experts said the design of the Soviet reactor, especially its lack of a containment vessel, also contributed to the severity of the accident, the worst in history.

Mr. Gonzalez said triple safety back-up features have been incorporated into the design of the Cuban reactors "so that if one element fails, others will take its place." He also told reporters that the surrounding flora, fauna, earth and water within a radius of several miles will be monitored regularly to detect even slight increases in radioactivity.

Water from the reactor will be treated at a special filtering plant to remove any traces of radioactivity before it is allowed to drain into the sea.

Cienfuegos Bay is an important commercial fishing area. After a recent oil spill from a Cuban ship alarmed local fishermen and government officials, Havana announced that Mr. Castro had reaffirmed earlier directives aimed at preventing contamination of the bay.

Mr. Gonzalez said that engineers and other Cuban nuclear energy specialists had started to undergo training more than six years ago, preparing to operate the Cuban nuclear power plant when it starts up.

He said most of the personnel had gained practical experience at similar nuclear energy plants in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria or another Eastern bloc nation.