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Misinformation is fueling anti-nuclear protests: John Ritch

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*The Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan has been a real eye opener for the world on the hazards of embracing atomic energy, today even India a country so much in adoration of its achievements in nuclear technology is now witnessing a severe backlash, with thousands of protestors at the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu literally stopping the opening up of the nuclear reactors in their backyards. In an exclusive interview John Ritch, Director General of the World Nuclear Association (WNA), London, the world's largest body representing most of the nuclear industry. He was also the former Ambassador of the USA to the global nuclear watchdog the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1998 when India exploded the nuclear bombs at Pokharan, he defends the case for going nuclear like never before, while accepting that public acceptance is at its lowest. Speaking to **NDTV's Science Editor Pallava Bagla** he said India has painted itself into a corner by passing such a nuclear liability law.*

NDTV: *Is nuclear energy safe, public acceptance of atomic energy post Fukushima seems to be at its lowest ever? Even India is witnessing widespread protests at Kudankulam where a reactor is ready to be commissioned?*

John Ritch: The nuclear industry was operating on the paradigm that if we were safe long enough, that we would demonstrate to the public that we were in a post Chernobyl era of reactors that didn't have large scale consequences even when something went wrong, and if we had a long enough period of safe performance we will win public acceptance, acquiescence around the

world. And Fukushima demonstrated that you can get a long way on extended safety performance in quelling public anxieties. But once you get an episode which has a high silhouette like Fukushima, you demonstrate the complete fragility of public acceptance around the world.

What this tells me is that we need to rethink our paradigm, build even further safety assurance, but also get very-very serious about the business of ending the public's lack of understanding about the essential clean energy technology. We are walking on a tightrope when the world is so dependent upon a vast expansion of this uniquely capable clean energy technology and we have a worldwide public that is striving to death about it. That is not the way to conduct public business.

We have far too many adults walking around, who don't have the faintest idea of how to think about radiation, how to think about nuclear power, and they are prey to the most profound mythologies about nuclear as a consequence of it. And we need to recognize that the opponents of nuclear power are religious in their dedication and willing to lie about it, to manufacture accusations about it that have no real bearing in science or reality. And we need to concert our energies to build public defenses against that kind of myth building and misinformation, it needs to be done in China, in India, which are the two biggest programs in the world.

I am worried that we haven't done enough about educating the public apprehend the virtues and inherent safety of nuclear power. It has created a fragility of the public acceptance foundations with this technology.

Fukushima accident was an extremely serious event, but one that has not yet produced a fatality. And if you talk to serious radiation protection specialist, they will give you that it has not even hit the level of exposure to the public and even to the plant workers who were involved in mitigation, has not shortened anyone's life. So there are no fatalities, no cases of radiation sickness and no predictive life shortening results from these exposures.

NDTV: Do you believe the Japanese did a good job of what they did after the Fukushima accident?

John Ritch: Well, they certainly committed a momentous error, an error with enormous historical consequences, when they failed to flood proof the diesel generators at Fukushima. The old adage about for want of a nail a shoe is lost, for want of a shoe a horse was lost. This is really applicable to Japan. And the worldwide consequences of Fukushima, all tracing down to the lack of flood proofing the diesel generator, something that probably could have been remedied by the expenditure of few tens of thousands of dollars. Instead, it cost the world hundreds of billions of dollars and misguided response.

NDTV: The Japanese didn't report the meltdown immediately. Do you think that was a huge error?

John Ritch: I don't have any fingers of accusation to point on that. I think they were struggling to be clear themselves on what was happening. What's happening inside a nuclear power plant in those circumstances is not something easy to know. We did not find out what had actually occurred at Three Mile Island until a couple of decades later. We didn't really know.

NDTV: But isn't that enough for the public to feel offended that if the reactor engineers don't know what is happening inside a plant and they take four weeks to inform the public that there was a meltdown?

John Ritch: No, no there are some things that you can't know. Your inability to know them doesn't mean the public is in danger. The degree of fuel melt is a valuable piece of information but it is not a crucial piece of information. There is a tendency, particularly on the part of the media to think that when something is melting, you are on the threshold of the China Syndrome.

NDTV: So do you think is the so called nuclear renaissance over, with Germany phasing out nuclear power and others putting a moratorium?

John Ritch: Just as Germany will, many other countries will find out that that avoiding nuclear is a futile path to follow. They will come back to reality at some point. Rich nations can afford the luxury of fantasy, but even rich nations can't engage in fantasy forever.

NDTV: Well, do you see a hiccup happening on this road to nuclear renaissance? Or is it an eclipse?

John Ritch: I think a bump on the road or hiccup, both those are apt metaphors, but not an eclipse and not an end. This is a watershed in the history of nuclear power. It is still a relatively young technology, it has matured greatly.

NDTV: Sure, but this is having an impact in a country which is deeply abiding to nuclear like India, I mean when you are seeing a backlash both at Kudankulam and Jaitapur?

John Ritch: Welcome to the modern world. You are, globalizing this sure is for better or worse in this evolution into a modern industrial society where misinformation flows agilely through our electronic systems of communication and where you can mobilize, it's very easy to mobilize people around a proposition, particularly a hysterical proposition.

NDTV: The UN recently held a special session on nuclear safety, people have deep concerns?

John Ritch: The United Nations chief Ban Moon did not hold a special UN conference after the BP oil spill but he held one after Fukushima. This is irresponsible pandering to public fears. There was nothing gained by the conference that occurred in New York. A bunch of people who don't know very much about the topic came and gave speeches, pretending that they are going to do something about it in their own respective ways.

NDTV: I am sure you've been following some of the developments in India. India passed a liability which has not gone down very well with the suppliers. What is your understanding?

John Ritch: I know. For many years, in the India was a victim of a very unfair geopolitical system that arose from the historical fact that India exploded its first nuclear device after the NPT came into being. As a consequence of that, India was treated unfairly, but the great contribution of President George Bush was to have taken the steps that were necessary to end that unfairness. As a consequence of that I felt that the door had been opened for normalizing of nuclear commerce with India that would benefit the world and benefit India, and I was

disappointed when this rather technical bit of obstacle arose in the path of normalization of global nuclear commerce.

NDTV: You are talking of the liability law?

John Ritch: Yes, this unique Indian approach to liability. I think there should be a presumption that in the world, between all of the other world and nations have been able to agree on something. It is very sound. We don't get generalized agreement on something like that unless you have a very sound body of standards and procedures and thus I can't justify to myself that any need India had to carve out its own path on this subject and I think it was detrimental to Indian interests to try to do so.

NDTV: Yeah, but not many countries have faced the Bhopal type disaster, thousands of people died here. That was the provocation to have a very strong nuclear liability legislation which went right up to the supplier?

John Ritch: How would going to the supplier have changed the result for Bhopal? How does that apply to nuclear suppliers?

NDTV: I don't make laws. I can't justify, but at the same time...

John Ritch: I understand that liability be felt in the home country that has suffered from this chemical catastrophe. But how does that relate the General Electric plant being built in India? If it is good enough to be built anywhere else in the world, why does it suddenly have to be, the same plant have to be extra protected in India.

NDTV: That's the precondition...

John Ritch: That's like saying you are not going to take any Boeing airliners unless you have special liability which traces back to Seattle, Washington. It is not a rational response.

NDTV: What is the way forward in that?

John Ritch: I don't know. It is always difficult when you have yourself as your opponent. The world painted itself into a corner treating India unfairly after the NPT; India has now painted itself into a corner on liability, and I don't have a solution, I will leave it to the Indians to come out.

NDTV: How to extricate from this impasse is the issue?

John Ritch: The reality is that the world standard is perfectly satisfactory and the threat that is being guarded against here is virtually non-existent, that there will be something inherently wrong with a Westinghouse or an Areva or a General Electric power plant. But apparently it is being built in many other countries of the world. They are going to be built in China, they are going to be built in America. Why do they need special protection in India? It is not logical. And I don't like illogical behavior when it impedes the interests of a country that I would like to see benefit maximum, maximally from nuclear power. I would like to see India emerge not only as a great purchaser of nuclear technology but a great provider of nuclear technology. But the longer we stay bogged down in these preliminary issues, the longer we would be wasting valuable time

in moving ahead.

NDTV: India also recently brought in a bill for enactment of a nuclear safety body, the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority. Have you had a chance to look at that?

John Ritch: I think it is fine for a regulator to be independent. We want people in every regulatory profession, not just in nuclear, to take an independent eye and seek and uphold the public interest. That requires a degree of independence. On the other hand, when a country regulates the technology, they are doing so because they have accepted that it's valuable. If they didn't take it as valuable they would prohibit it. Therefore the purpose of the regulator is not to impede the technology the purpose of the regulator is to facilitate its beneficial use by ensuring that high standards are adhered to in the use of it. So I am all for independence in regulation, but I don't believe a regulator should see itself as having an adversarial relationship with the industry it regulates either.

NDTV: Yeah, but the relationship till now has been a very cozy one, why just in India, in many countries. Reactor designers become operators, operators become regulators. It's a free flow, and people then join the private industry from the same group. It's a very cozy relationship. I don't see that relationship in any other industry. What do you have to say about that?

John Ritch: It is certainly not true in the United States.

NDTV: But in the rest of the world it is a very cozy relationship. Take France, take Japan, and India is also in the same boat?

John Ritch: Perhaps I would think this problem is more serious if we had been besieged by many large fatality accidents in nuclear power. But I think I am correct in saying that in fourteen thousand five hundred years of civil nuclear power production we have not seen a fatality apart from the limited number of deaths that occurred as a result of the Chernobyl accident. But you set Chernobyl aside, we have an industry that has achieved fourteen thousand five hundred reactor years of safe performance. We can talk about an industry that is still secret, we can talk about an industry that has too cozy a relationship between regulators and operators we are not talking about an industry that has thrown muck on planet Earth. Very few industries have produced such beneficial results with such an extremely low toll of damage to the environment or the public. You set Chernobyl aside, and recognize in a process with limited consequences, this industry has an amazing record of safe performance and beneficial contribution. That basic fact is much too little appreciated by the public.

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