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# Ombudsman slams secrecy over Fukushima contamination

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Following complaints from citizens, the European Ombudsman has opened an investigation into the EU's permitted levels of food contamination following the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan and their communication to the wider public. Similar complaints are also being heard in France.

## Background

After the radioactive cloud emanating from Japan's stricken Fukushima nuclear power plant reached Europe in late March, CRIIRAD, a French NGO specialised on radioactivity measurements, said it had detected radioactive iodine-131 in rainwater in south-eastern France.

In parallel testing, the French Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN), the national public institution monitoring nuclear and radiological risks, found iodine-131 in milk.

In normal times, no trace of iodine-131 should be detectable in rainwater or milk.

The Euratom Directive of 13 May 1996 establishes general principles and safety standards on radiation protection in Europe.

"Based on complaints submitted to me, it appears that a number of Union citizens perceive a lack of precise and reliable information as regards the changes made to the maximum permitted levels in the aftermath of the Fukushima accident," wrote EU Ombudsman P. Nikiforos Diamandouros in a letter addressed to European Commission President José Manuel Barroso on 19 May.

Diamandouros noted that while the EU executive's websites provide links to relevant adopted legislation (297/2011 and 351/2011), "no comparative information on the maximum permitted levels before and after the Fukushima accident has apparently been made available".

Therefore, the Ombudsman decided to launch an own-initiative inquiry into the matter as a way to provide "citizen-friendly" information.

He asked the Commission to submit an opinion on the issue by 30 June 2011, calling for "precise figures, preferably also in the form of graphs and charts, which would allow an

easy identification of the maximum permitted levels in force" both before and after the Japanese nuclear accident.

### **French authorities pressed to evaluate Fukushima fallout**

The Ombudsman's request for more transparency in communicating data to the public was not isolated.

Last week (25 May), a French NGO specialised in measuring radioactivity, CRIIRAD, asked the French government to investigate what it described as "serious failures" in measuring the impact of the Fukushima nuclear accident in France and communicating the results to the public.

According to the NGO, the radioactive cloud from the stricken reactors at Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant reached France two days earlier than officially announced. In addition, the levels of radioactive iodine-131 were 20 times higher on 22 March than announced on 24 March, according to the NGO's findings.

CRIIRAD reached its conclusions after analysing data recorded by the French National Network for the Measurement of Radioactivity in the Environment (RNM), an official body.

In a letter addressed to French Prime Minister François Fillon and the Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN), CRIIRAD questions in particular the work of the country's Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN) and demands an investigation into the chronology of facts and the responsibilities of the different actors involved in informing the public about the Fukushima fallout.

But the IRSN refuted the accusations, saying that the NGO had come to its conclusions based on surveys that correspond to several days of measurement rather than a single day, and reaffirmed that the fallout had probably reached France on 24 March as initially announced.

CRIIRAD also continues to condemn the authorities' "secrecy" regarding public access to data on radioactive contamination. Shortly after the 11 March earthquake and tsunami that hit the Japanese nuclear plant, the NGO launched an international "petition for total transparency on the airborne radioactivity we are breathing".

More than two months after the nuclear accident, Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) admitted last week that three out of six reactors at the nuclear plant suffered meltdowns within days of the 11 March earthquake and tsunami, raising worrying questions about why the scale of the disaster was not disclosed sooner.

## **Links**

### European Union

- European Ombudsman: [Ombudsman asks Commission to clarify permitted food contamination levels after Fukushima nuclear accident \(30 May 2011\) \[FR\] \[DE\]](#)
- European Ombudsman: [Case opened: Maximum permitted levels of radioactive contamination of foodstuffs in the EU before and after the Fukushima nuclear accident \(19 May 2011\)](#)

- European Ombudsman: [Letter from the European Ombudsman opening own-initiative inquiry OI/5/2011/BEH concerning the European Commission](#) (19 May 2011)
- Commission: [European Ombudsman \[FR\] \[DE\]](#)
- Commission memo: [Questions and Answers: Safety of food products imported from Japan](#) (8 April 2011)

#### NGOs and Think-Tanks

- CRIIRAD: [La contamination de la France métropolitaine dès le 22 mars 2011 a été cachée à la population. La CRIIRAD saisit le Premier ministre et l'ASN d'une demande d'enquête](#) (25 May 2011)

#### Press articles

- TF1: [Fukushima : on ne nous a pas tout dit ?](#) (26 May 2011)
- AFP: [Fukushima: la Criirad réclame une enquête sur l'évaluation de l'impact en France](#)
- Dnevnik, EurActiv's partner in Bulgaria: [Омбудсманът на ЕС иска повече информация за замърсяването от Фукушима](#)