Piper Alpha disaster: 25 years on, safety still priority

July 5 2013, by Jessica Berthereau

Fire-fighters extinguish a simulated gas leak during an exercise in Liverpool, England on September 7, 2010. A recent report from the industry body, Oil & Gas UK, found oil and gas leaks fell by 48 percent in three years between 2010 and 2013, just short of the 50 percent target.

Safety has vastly improved on North Sea oil and gas platforms since the deadly explosion on the Piper Alpha rig 25 years ago, but experts warn there is no room for complacency.

The energy industry's deadliest ever accident, on July 6, 1988, claimed the lives of 167 men when a gas leak caused a fire and then the collapse of the rig off the coast of Aberdeen in Scotland.

A recent report from the industry body, Oil & Gas UK, found oil and gas leaks fell by 48 percent in three years between 2010 and 2013, just short of the 50 percent target.

"While several major incidents have had to be addressed in the period covered by this report, non-fatal, over-three day, and combined fatal and major injury rates have all been in steady decline," said Robert Paterson, health and safety director at Oil & Gas UK.

But Jake Molloy, offshore organiser of the RMT union, which represents about a quarter of the 28,500 staff working on North Sea platforms, warned safety remains an issue.

"The fact that we had 47 major or significant gas leaks over the course of the last year, as well as a number of major injuries, demonstrates that there is always room for improvement," he told AFP.

Patterson accepts "there is no room for complacency".

"While the review that followed the Piper Alpha disaster provided the foundation for what is now one of the most robust offshore health and safety regimes in the world, the approaching 25th anniversary of that tragedy only serves to remind us that we must never stop at striving to make things safer," he said.

Only 61 workers survived the fire on the Piper Alpha rig, which produced the equivalent of 300,000 barrels of oil a day, and many of them were badly burned.

Lord Cullen, the judge who led the investigation into the tragedy, found the accident was not simply the result of technical or human failures.

"As is often the case, such failures are indicators of underlying weaknesses in the management of safety," he told an anniversary conference in Aberdeen last month.

His investigation made 106 recommendations, all of which were adopted by the industry.

But he warned: "No regulations can make up for deficiencies in the way safety is actually managed.

"As I said in my report, it is essential to create a corporate atmosphere or culture in which safety is understood to be and is accepted as number one priority."

Molloy said many of his union's members still do not feel comfortable raising safety concerns with management.

"There is still a degree of fear amongst workers about challenging and about reporting, for fear that they could suffer as a consequence of doing so," he said.

He pointed to the Deepwater Horizon accident in 2010, when a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. It was the worst oil spill in US history and killed 11 people.

In the opening of a trial in February to determine how much BP and its subcontractors should pay in damages, lawyers for the US government said they had proof that a "culture of disregard to safety" led to the blowout.

"It was one of the most technically advanced pieces of equipment on the planet," Molloy said.

"And despite that the workers died primarily because they weren't able or willing to challenge what was going on on that installation in the preceding weeks."

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