

Situation is Out of Control: Risk of Blowout on Norway's Offshore Gullfaks C Platform

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Two gas leaks were detected at Norway's the Gullfaks C oil platform Wednesday afternoon, and the situation worsened Thursday when the well was destabilized due to a loss of formation pressure. Eighty nine people were evacuated from the platform. The well has suffered similar incidents, one as recently as April 30th this year and again in December 23rd 2009.

"Three major events of this kind in less than five months proves that Statoil is not able to control this situation," says President of the Bellona Foundation, Frederic Hauge.

Bellona has received new information that sheds some light over what actually happened on Gullfaks C, which is operated by the Norwegian state owned oil company Statoil. The situation remained unresolved Friday afternoon.

The discovery comes at a critical time when world media attention is focussed on events unfolding in the Gulf of Mexico after the BP-operated Deepwater Horizon well explodes on April 20th and oil is making landfall in Louisiana's vulnerable marshes and bayous . BP officials there are finally admitting that the gusher at the sea floor is spilling significantly more than 5,000 barrels of oil a day. Meanwhile, BP has still not come up with an effective method to cap the well.

Three critical events

For the third time in five months, a critical event has occurred in Statoil's well 34/10-C-6 on Gullfaks, during drilling of a side track. The last event occurred this Wednesday afternoon, at 3.47 pm, when the well was destabilized. Statoil immediately began efforts to establish pressure control on Gullfaks C. But all efforts toward stabilizing the well with heavy mud have so far been unsuccessful.

The well is still unstable, and the pressure still not under control. Currently the Blowout Preventer (BOP) is the only safety barrier.

Not acceptable

"This is not acceptable," said Hauge. "According to Statoil's own report on the event to the Petroleum Security Authority (PSA) of May 19th, different parts of the BOP were replaced that day. We also know that the O-ring on the BOP was mended around Christmas last year, when there was a similar gas leak on December 23rd," Hauge added.

Wednesday, increased levels of gas were detected in the platform shaker. The levels were

so high that an emergency situation was declared – and non-critical staff was ordered to the life boats. The evacuation was later cancelled, as lower concentrations of gas were observed.

The situation is getting worse

Thursday however, the situation took a downturn, and because of a change of pressure in the well, a total of 89 people were evacuated. One hundred and forty people are still on the platform.

So far Statoil has injected 600 cubic meters of heavy oil mud in the well in an attempt to stabilize the pressure. The mud keeps flowing into the reservoir, however, and is lost. Six hundred cubic meters is twice the amount of mud which is normally at disposal on the platform.

Statoil therefore is depending on mud from other sources and additional mud is now being transferred to the platform from supply ships.

'The situation is out of control'

According to Bellona's sources, the drillstring is stuck in the well.

"Bellona's position is that the situation is out of control, and that there is still a real risk of a blow out," says Frederic Hauge.

"What happened on Gullfaks C just before Christmas last year, was defined as the most serious event on the Norwegian shelf in 2009, with a category Red 2-definition," said Frederic Hauge. "What we are experiencing on Gullfaks C right now is an even more serious situation."

He also alluded to an event that according to Bellona's sources occurred on Gullfaks C on April 30th – but which has not been reported to the PSA.

"As far as we know, there was instability in the well on April 30th. When a new situation occurs less than a month later, we question Statoil's ability to judge in this situation and their will to take safety seriously. It is nothing less than sensational that Statoil is responsible for three events in five months. This is dramatic," said Hauge.

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