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JUAN GONZALEZ: Now to the Gulf of Mexico, where the enormous oil slick in the Gulf continues to expand. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has ordered a three-week halt to all new offshore drilling permits. Emphasizing that the companies involved had made, quote, “major mistakes,” Salazar spoke to reporters Thursday outside BP’s Houston crisis center. He noted that lifting the moratorium on new permits will depend on the outcome of a federal investigation over the Gulf spill and the recommendations to be delivered to President Obama at the end of the month.

SECRETARY KEN SALAZAR: Minerals Management Service will not be issuing any permits for the construction of new offshore wells. That process will be concluded here on May the 28th. At that point in time, we’ll make decisions about how we plan on moving forward. There are some very major mistakes that were made by companies that were involved. But today is not really the day to deal with those issues. Today and the days ahead really are about trying to get control of the problem.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Secretary Salazar added that the existing offshore oil and natural gas drilling will continue, even as public meetings to discuss new oil drilling off the Virginia coast have been canceled for this month.

AMY GOODMAN: Salazar’s announcement comes on the heel of a Washington Post exposé revealing that the Minerals Management Service had approved BP’s drilling plan in the Gulf of Mexico without any environmental review. The article notes that the agency under Secretary Salazar, had quote, “categorically excluded” BP’s drilling, as well as hundreds of other offshore drilling permits, from environmental review. The agency was able to do this using a loophole in the National Environmental Policy Act created for minimally intrusive actions, like building outhouses and hiking trails.

Well, for more on this story, we’re joined now from Tucson, Arizona by Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Welcome to Democracy Now!, Kieran. Explain this loophole, how you found it, and what it means for the Gulf.

KIERAN SUCKLING: Well, when a federal government is going to approve a project, it has to go through an environmental review. But for projects that have very, very little impact, like building an outhouse or a hiking trail, they can use something called a categorical exclusion and say there’s no impact here at all, so we don’t need to spend energy or time doing a review.

Well, we looked at the oil drilling permits being issued by the Minerals Management Service in the Gulf, and we were shocked to find out that they were approving hundreds of massive oil drilling permits using this categorical exclusion instead of doing a full environmental impact study. And then we found out that BP’s drilling permit, the very one that exploded, was done under this loophole, and so it was never reviewed by the federal government at all. It was just rubber-stamped.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, according to the Washington Post article, in one of its assessments, the agency, quote, “estimated that ‘a large oil spill’ from a [deep] platform,” like the Deepwater Horizon, “would not exceed a total of 1,500 barrels and that a ‘deepwater spill,’ occurring ‘[offshore of] the inner Continental shelf,’ would not reach the coast.” Obviously, both of those—those assessments have proven dramatically off the mark. As many as 250 to 400 waivers a year for drilling in the Gulf?

KIERAN SUCKLING: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And it’s also important to note that when the government says it’s very unlikely the spill will occur, it’s unlikely the spill will reach shore, those aren’t even the government’s own assessments. They’re just repeating what BP, Exxon and other oil companies put in their drilling applications. And since there’s no environmental impact study, the government never actually does an independent review. So everyone is just repeating the industry’s statements as they rubber-stamp the approvals.

AMY GOODMAN: Reporters questioned White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs on Wednesday about why BP’s Gulf of Mexico drilling operation was exempted from the detailed environmental impact analysis last year.

REPORTER: Why BP was exempted from the environmental impact analysis?

ROBERT GIBBS: Yeah, well, the—there are a series of reviews that have to—that have to—you have to go through in order to

get drilling permits, the process by which was referenced in that article is part of the review that Secretary Salazar is undergoing.

REPORTER: Robert, does the White House believe it was a mistake for this categorical exemption to be granted to BP for Deepwater Horizon?

ROBERT GIBBS: That's part of the investigation. I don't know the answer to that.

REPORTER: OK, so that's something that you're looking into presently?

ROBERT GIBBS: I would say, as the President asked Secretary Salazar to undertake a thirty-day review of what happened, that that would certainly be part of the process under which he would evaluate.

AMY GOODMAN: Kieran Suckling, that was Robert Gibbs, White House press secretary. Respond to his response.

KIERAN SUCKLING: Yeah, I mean, the White House and the Department of Interior are really sort of ducking their heads on this issue right now, because it's an enormous problem, especially since just a few months ago the Government Accountability Office came out with a report on MMS's operations in Alaska, where they also have offshore oil drilling, and specifically said the agency is not doing these environmental studies properly. They're avoiding doing them at all. And then they went ahead knowing that the GAO had just done this study and continued to put them out. So, this is not something new. MMS knew they had a problem. In fact, when Interior Secretary Salazar first came into office, he announced, "There's a new sheriff in town. I'm going to clean up this corrupt agency." And instead of doing that, he's pushed them to put out more offshore oil drilling permits, while not cleaning up what is clearly a broken process of doing any environmental review at all.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, I want to play a clip of President Obama, where he says that oil spills don't come from rigs, but from refineries. He was speaking on April 2nd, just over two weeks before the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today generally don't cause spills. They are technologically very advanced. Even during Katrina, the spills didn't come from the oil rigs, they came from the refineries onshore.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Kieran Suckling, your response?

KIERAN SUCKLING: Yeah, I mean, I think what the President said here is actually just very, very critical, because he is repeating, and I suspect without even knowing it, the big lie of offshore oil drilling. For decades, the oil companies and the Minerals Management Services have told us, "Oil drilling is safe, it's fine, that's not where oil spills come from." In fact, that's the basis of not doing any environmental review, is you simply assert it will never be a problem, therefore you don't even have to study it. When it's true that they don't leak often, but when they do leak, it's absolutely catastrophic. It's very similar to nuclear power plants. They don't often fail, but when they fail, it's catastrophic. And therefore, you have to plan for catastrophe. You have to do very intensive environmental analysis, not simply say, "It's rare, so we can ignore it."

AMY GOODMAN: Kieran Suckling, what do you think has to happen right now?

KIERAN SUCKLING: Well, first off, I think that the President should announce a complete moratorium on all new offshore oil drilling. This three-week time-out is really too little, too late. And it's very important to do that now, because the President, under the urging of Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, has planned to open up new offshore oil drilling in Alaska, in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, and on the Atlantic Coast. And that just needs to end. It's not safe anywhere, anytime.

Secondly, the President should immediately revoke existing oil permits, and especially in Alaska. Shell Oil, this July, is going to start doing offshore oil drilling in the Chukchi Sea of Alaska. And if you think it's difficult to clean up oil in the relatively warm, calm Gulf of Mexico, imagine trying to do this with icebergs and sea ice, twenty hours of darkness in the Arctic Oceans. It just cannot be done. If this spill had happened in Alaska, its magnitude would have been ten times worse than has happened in the Gulf.

Then, thirdly, the President should start an initiation of an investigation of Ken Salazar and his role in allowing this to happen. Salazar has been a major proponent of the offshore oil drilling industry. He passed legislation as a senator in 2006 to open up the Gulf of Mexico in the first place to offshore oil drilling. He gets campaign contributions by British Petroleum. And then he walks into this agency he is supposed to reform, and instead of reforming it, pushes it to do even more offshore oil drilling. So Ken Salazar is part of the problem here, not the solution. He should not be doing the investigation of MMS. He should be under investigation for helping to cause this crisis.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Kieran Suckling, we want to thank you very much for being with us, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, speaking to us from Tucson, Arizona.