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Russia: Nuclear Security System Comes Under Question

By Francesca Mereu

Liberal Russian lawmaker Sergei Mitrokhin, a lawmaker from the liberal Yabloko party, says he encountered no problems entering a secret nuclear waste dump in central Siberia -- despite having no authorization to be there. At a press conference on 15 February in Moscow, Mitrokhin said his action was aimed at demonstrating that Russia is not ready to begin its proposed plan to import nuclear waste for reprocessing. The lawmaker, who described the country's nuclear safety standards as "non-existent," said the situation has made Russia an easy target for nuclear terrorists.

Moscow, 18 February 2002 (RFE/RL) -- Sergei Mitrokhin, a lawmaker from the liberal Yabloko party, last week warned that Russia's nuclear waste facilities lack proper security and could be an easy target for nuclear terrorists.

On 9 February, Mitrokhin -- in broad daylight and accompanied by two Greenpeace activists and three NTV cameramen -- entered a high-security nuclear waste processing plant near the central Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk with no intervention by security personnel. At a press conference on 15 February, Mitrokhin described how easy it was to enter the facility.

"We got close to the [nuclear waste] storage area of the Krasnoyarsk Mining and Chemical Complex, and we met with no opposition from either the security system or the security guards. After this expedition, if I were asked whether Russia's nuclear security system is good or not, I would answer that the system is neither good nor bad. It is simply non-existent."

Mitrokhin says it took his team a little over an hour to walk to the plant's reservoir facility, which holds 3,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel. Mitrokhin, whose remarks came the day after NTV broadcast the Krasnoyarsk footage, said he was "shocked" to discover the apparent ease with which anyone can approach the reservoir -- which is scheduled to receive thousands of additional tons of spent nuclear fuel from abroad according to Russia's new waste-import program.

Last July, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law the controversial plan allowing Russia to import and store some 20,000 tons of the world's spent nuclear fuel. The law has attracted widespread condemnation among environmentalists, who believe Russia will be transformed into a nuclear dustbin.

Mitrokhin says the Krasnoyarsk complex -- also known as the Gorno-Chemical Plant -- is a crucial cog in the import program, a plan the Nuclear Power Ministry has said will bring in some \$20 billion to the nation's coffers.

"The Gorno-Chemical Plant is the place where [41 tons of] spent nuclear fuel from Bulgaria are today being stored. It is also the place where a new reservoir for spent nuclear fuel, intended to store nuclear waste from all over the world, is going to be built. [Moreover, authorities] want to build a so-called RT-2 nuclear-waste reprocessing plant there."

Mitrokhin says such ambitions -- combined with the apparent disregard for safety he encountered during his trip to the plant -- make for a deeply perilous situation. If Russia continues to leave its nuclear facilities unguarded, the lawmaker says, the country will easily become "a potential target for acts of retaliation by terrorists." As a member of the international antiterror coalition, he adds, Russia is duty-bound to take responsibility for the safety of its nuclear facilities.

Vladimir Chuprov, a nuclear expert with Greenpeace, says sites like the Gorno-Chemical Combine are extremely vulnerable to terrorist attacks. The results, he says, would be devastating.

"In the instance of a terrorist act, it is possible that there would be an explosion like the one at Chornobyl. Experts say it would only take a few dozen kilograms of common explosives."

Mitrokhin, a member of the presidential commission on controlling imports of spent nuclear fuel, says officials from the Nuclear Power Ministry, speaking before the Duma (lower house of parliament) earlier this month, said there were no security risks at any of Russia's 96 nuclear facilities.

But Ivan Blokov, another Greenpeace activist (Blokov and Chuprov were not the two Greenpeace employees to travel to the Gorno-Chemical Plant with Mitrokhin. Greenpeace has refused to release the names of the individuals who did go), says greater transparency is needed regarding the activities of the Nuclear Power Ministry, which he described as operating "outside state control and doing what it likes." Moreover, Blokov says few of the country's nuclear plants and research centers receive enough money from the federal budget to maintain even modest security standards.

"An interesting example is offered by the Krasnoyarsk Audit Court, which supervised what was going on at the Gorno-Chemical Plant. It turned out that the [plant] had financial problems. The money that the plant receives for spent fuel -- earlier it was \$350 for a kilogram, now it's \$620 a kilogram -- is enough to pay only part of the expenses. It's not enough money to pay for everything."

RFE/RL was not able to reach officials from the Nuclear Power Ministry for comment. But Mitrokhin says he intends to send President Putin a copy of the footage shot by NTV at the Krasnoyarsk plant.

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