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Break-in Highlights Nuclear Security Problems

By Nabi Abdullaev
Staff Writer

In broad daylight, a State Duma deputy, two Greenpeace activists and three NTV cameramen sneaked into a supposedly high-security industrial complex in western Siberia and spent several hours near storage facilities containing 3,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel. The six men took dozens of photographs, shot a video and returned to Moscow undisturbed.

"We entered through two-by-two-meter holes in the barbed wire and walked on well-trampled paths, probably made by local citizens," Sergei Mitrokhin, a liberal lawmaker in the Duma's Yabloko faction, said of his break-in at the Krasnoyarsk Mining and Chemical Plant, which was shown in a special report by NTV broadcast Thursday night. "The guards drove past us several times, and we passed by their sentry boxes, but we pretended to be locals and nobody stopped us."

In November, the Krasnoyarsk plant received 41 tons of spent nuclear fuel from the Kozlodui plant in Bulgaria under a controversial new law allowing the import of spent nuclear fuel for reprocessing and storage.

Advocates of the law, which was signed by President Vladimir Putin in July, argue that Russia could earn \$20 billion over the next decade by importing some 20,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel. However, environmentalists have fought the law, saying that turning Russia into the world's leading nuclear recycling facility would cause far greater ecological damage than the billions earned could repair. When the first consignment of spent nuclear fuel arrived in Russia from Bulgaria in November, Greenpeace activists demonstrated outside the Nuclear Power Ministry in gas masks and chemical protection suits.

At a news conference in Moscow on Friday, Mitrokhin said that his break-in at the Krasnoyarsk plant was designed to show that Russia is not ready to import radioactive material. The country's system of nuclear safety is not just poor but "nonexistent," he said.

Mitrokhin, a member of the presidential commission on controlling imports of spent nuclear fuel, said that during a hearing on ecological safety in the Duma on Feb. 7, the Nuclear Power Ministry assured deputies that there were no security problems at its facilities.

But Mitrokhin said Friday that he could have easily climbed onto the roof of the Krasnoyarsk plant's storage building and got inside it.

"I was shaken to see it," he said. "Anybody can come to a depository with extremely dangerous materials and do whatever he wishes near them. And the Nuclear Power Ministry plans to bring 20,000 tons of nuclear supplies from abroad here and leave it adrift."

According to Mitrokhin, safety measures at most of Russia's 96 nuclear plants and research centers are not covered by the federal budget at all. As a member of the international coalition fighting terrorism, Russia must be more responsible for the safety of its nuclear facilities, Mitrokhin said, otherwise it will become "the weakest link of the coalition and a potential target for terrorists."

Vladimir Chuprov, a Greenpeace nuclear expert, shared his fears. "Several dozen kilograms of regular explosives would be enough to



Igor Tabakov / MT

Greenpeace activists protesting against the importing of spent nuclear fuel outside the Nuclear Power Ministry in November.

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trigger a new Chernobyl there," he said Friday.

Chuprova said the plant's storage facilities contain 1 billion curies of radioactive waste. The radioactive discharge from Chernobyl was about 50 million curies, he said.

However, the management of the Krasnoyarsk plant insisted last week that security at its storage and transportation facilities remained unbreakable.

"We employ several hundred guards, and one regiment of Interior Ministry troops is delegated to guard us," Vasily Zhidkov, the head of the plant, said in the NTV report. It was unclear whether Zhidkov was aware of Mitrokhin's break-in at the time.

Zhidkov could be reached for comment about Mitrokhin's claims Friday.

Mitrokhin said that he would send a video about the break-in to Putin. In addition, Greenpeace said it has sent letters about the security breaches at the plant to the Federal Security Service and to the Prosecutor General's Office.

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