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Fighting around Ukraine nuclear plant risks lives of tens of millions

Zaporizhzhia in war zone serves as reminder of nuclear power's unacceptable dangers

TAKOMA PARK, MD, August 8, 2022 — Conflicting news stories about possible shelling of the giant Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in southeastern Ukraine, are a warning that nuclear power plants are a liability, not an asset, especially under extreme conditions of war or climate change.

While both the Russians and the Ukrainians blame the other side for the attacks, the fact remains that any damage to the six-reactor site, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, could result in long-term catastrophic consequences that would extend far beyond the war zone.

“If even just one of the six operational reactors there suffered catastrophic damaged and released its radioactive inventory we are talking about a humanitarian disaster that would dwarf Chernobyl,” said Linda Pentz Gunter, international specialist at Beyond Nuclear, referring to the 1986 nuclear accident that contaminated more than 1,000 square miles, forced permanent evacuations and sickened or killed potentially hundreds of thousands of people.

The six reactors, only two of which are reportedly still operating, contain far more radioactivity, both in the working reactors and in the irradiated fuel pools, than was present at the relatively new Chernobyl Unit 4 when it exploded.

“This situation brings home all too alarmingly just how dangerous nuclear power is as an energy source,” Pentz Gunter continued. “We would not be having this conversation if we were dealing with solar panels or wind turbines. The potential to cause a catastrophic accident even on a good day should have been enough to end the use of this technology. Having reactors in a war zone is a nightmare waiting to become a grim reality.”

Reactor buildings are not designed to withstand missile attacks under war conditions and are vulnerable even in normal times, as was witnessed by the three reactor building explosions at Fukushima-Daiichi, Japan, in March 2011, after a major earthquake and tsunami caused loss of both off-site and on-site power.

Zaporizhzhia has come under military assault before, when the Russians fired at it in early March, causing a fire that fortunately did not affect any of the reactor buildings or

fuel storage sites. But after more than five months of fighting, the site has become more perilous, given its proximity to the eastern regions that are at the heart of contention between the two countries.

“The risk of fire is one of the most serious hazards at nuclear power plants on a routine basis,” said Paul Gunter, reactor oversight specialist at Beyond Nuclear. “A fire at Zaporizhzhia could spread to the irradiated fuel storage pools located outside primary containment and lead to explosions and meltdowns,” he continued.

“If the fuel pools are damaged and cooling water boils away, exposing the highly radioactive rods to air, we could see hydrogen explosions and the spread of radioactivity far worse than occurred at Fukushima,” Gunter concluded. Prevailing winds would then distribute the radioactive gases across Ukraine and Europe and, depending on the size of the disaster, even further, including to the United States.

That would deposit radioactive fallout on potentially tens of millions of people causing health effects that can be both fatal or persistent. Enduring radioactivity in the environment can cause long-lasting harm to health. Even 36 years after the original Chernobyl disaster, health impacts are still being felt because of continued exposure.

“People still living in Chernobyl-contaminated areas are showing increases in cardiovascular disorders, issues with sight and respiration, and significantly increased rates of birth defects and deformities,” said Cindy Folkers, radiation and health hazards specialist at Beyond Nuclear.

“Given the far greater amounts of radiation that could be released in the event of a major disaster at Zaporizhzhia, we would expect to see greater numbers of people seriously harmed and for far longer than the health impacts caused by Chernobyl,” she said.

Beyond Nuclear is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization. Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abolish both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear. Beyond Nuclear: 7304 Carroll Avenue, #182, Takoma Park, MD 20912. Info@beyondnuclear.org. www.beyondnuclear.org