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Time to avert nuclear catastrophe

War escalation around Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant could be disaster for all of Europe

TAKOMA PARK, MD, Wednesday, May 10, 2023 — Fears of an imminent Ukrainian offensive that could put the country's six-reactor Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in even greater danger, should prompt immediate efforts to negotiate a ceasefire, if not an end to the Russian war against Ukraine, urged safe energy group, Beyond Nuclear today.

News reports that civilians around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant are being evacuated suggest that the conflict already consuming the southwestern region of Ukraine could be about to escalate, potentially engulfing the nuclear plant.

The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant has already escaped close calls, the target of shelling and missile attacks on at least one occasion and with frequent losses of offsite power that, if not restored promptly, could lead to a meltdown.

The plant has been occupied by Russian forces since March 4, 2022. Rumors abound that a severely depleted workforce is laboring under stressful and even violent conditions, while other staff have fled or have disappeared.

As a precaution, all six Zaporizhzhia reactors are currently shut down, but that does not mean they are out of danger.

"The fuel in the reactor core still requires electricity to power cooling, as do the pumps that supply cooling water to the fuel pools," warned Beyond Nuclear international specialist, Linda Pentz Gunter. "A meltdown is still possible. Putting the reactors in what is termed 'cold shutdown' just buys workers more time to restore power, but a reliable supply of electricity to the site is still essential to avoid disaster.

"The consequences not only for the people of Ukraine and neighboring Russia, but for all of Europe, should any or all of these reactors melt down or suffer a fuel pool fire are unimaginably dire," Pentz Gunter said.

“We only have to look at the fallout map from the 1986 Chornobyl disaster, a single unit with a far smaller radioactive inventory, to understand the potential scale of such a tragedy,” she said.

Chornobyl contaminated 40% of the European landmass with long-lived radioactive fallout and created an effectively permanent 1,000 square mile Exclusion Zone around the stricken nuclear site.

“A major assault on Zaporizhzhia, or even a prolonged loss of power, could lead to a catastrophe that would dwarf the impact of Chornobyl,” Pentz Gunter said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has called for immediate action to prevent a nuclear disaster but has summarily failed in its quest to establish what it termed a “safe zone” around the Zaporizhzhia site. At the same time, the IAEA persists in its mission to promote continued and expanded use of nuclear power around the world, despite the obvious dangers in Ukraine.

“Despite the seeming entrenchment from both Ukraine and Russia, it is time for the United States to step up efforts toward a negotiated peace agreement rather than helping to prolong a likely unwinnable war,” Pentz Gunter added. “The stakes are simply too high.”

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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 Nuc