

Twenty-five years after Chernobyl

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In this May 1986 file photo, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, the site of the world's worst nuclear accident, is seen in Chernobyl, Ukraine. Twenty-five years ago, the plant exploded, affecting about 3.3 million Ukrainians, including 1.5 million children. Photo: AP

Thanks to the global nuclear lobby's conspiracy, we still do not know the full truth about Chernobyl. We may never know the truth about Fukushima either.

On April 26, 1986, a reactor at Chernobyl exploded, setting off the world's worst nuclear catastrophe. It is tragically symbolic that exactly 25 years later, another nuclear disaster struck Japan. It is doubly tragic that the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant may eclipse what happened at Chernobyl. Critics say we may never know the truth about Fukushima, as we still do not know the full truth about Chernobyl, thanks to the global nuclear lobby's conspiracy.

The death toll from the Chernobyl explosion remains a hotly debated issue even today. International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Yukiya Amano told an international Chernobyl conference in Kiev, Ukraine, last week that "around 50 people engaged in the immediate emergency and recovery operations" had died.

Many experts find this figure grossly understated. Greenpeace has predicted that Chernobyl may ultimately cause some 2,70,000 cancer cases, more than 90,000 of which could prove fatal. In a book published in 2007, Russian biologist Alexei Yablokov and two Ukrainian researchers concluded that some 9,85,000 people had already died, mainly of cancer, till 2004. The book, called Chernobyl in Russian, was brought out in English two years later by the New York Academy of Sciences under the title Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment. Dr. Yablokov, former environmental advisor to the Russian President, has since updated his estimate of Chernobyl-related deaths, including stillbirths, to 1.6 million.

Such estimates are fiercely contested by IAEA experts. The official view of the U.N. watchdog is that the expected death toll among those affected by high radiation doses at Chernobyl may reach 4,000 in the coming decades. Compare this with the official data from Ukraine's Health Ministry: 530,000 died from radiation in the former Soviet state between 1987 and 2004.

Glaring discrepancies in casualty figures are mainly due to the refusal by the IAEA and the World Health Organisation to link increased disease incidence in affected territories to radiation, and to recognise the cancer risks and genetic impact of low radiation doses. Dr. Yablokov says his casualty estimates were based on over 5,000 scientific papers and radiological surveys, whereas the IAEA and the WHO used only 350 sources for their conclusions. While the IAEA claims that the ecological situation around Chernobyl is improving, independent researchers say it is, in fact, getting worse.

"Today, heavy transuranium elements — strontium-90, cesium-137 and plutonium — have started spreading from Chernobyl across Ukraine with underground water. Plutonium has been detected in water wells in Kiev and the Dnieper River," says nuclear physicist Anatony Demsky, who worked at Chernobyl for seven years adding "60 km away from Chernobyl beta radiation is 1,000 times above normal levels." Experts have long pointed to an inherent conflict of interest in the IAEA's twin role as promoter and regulator of nuclear technologies and material. "The IAEA's main statutory goal is to promote 'peaceful atoms'," Dr. Yablokov says. "Its link with the nuclear industry makes all the IAEA assessments biased."

The conflict of interest was at its most outrageous in the famous remark by Hans Blix, Director of the IAEA at the time of the Chernobyl disaster: "The atomic industry can take catastrophes like Chernobyl every year."

This thinking is typical of the international nuclear lobby. Top nuclear officials in Russia, for example, systematically minimise the impact of the Chernobyl disaster. During a recent panel discussion on Russian TV, Rafael Arutyunyan, First Deputy Director of the Russian Institute for Safe Development of Nuclear Power Industry, said Chernobyl was "a serious accident," which became a "catastrophe" only when the Soviet Union adopted a law that promised social protection to all people living in radiation affected territories.

Many researchers in Russia and other countries claim that the nuclear lobby has been deliberately suppressing the truth about radiation risks. Soon after its establishment in 1957, the IAEA signed agreements with the WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other U.N. agencies, which imposed constraints on independent studies of radiation and health. The IAEA/WHO agreement, for example, required that "whenever either organisation proposes to initiate a programme or activity on a subject in which the other organisation has or may have a substantial interest, the first party shall consult the other with a view to adjusting the matter by mutual agreement." This gave the IAEA effective veto power on dissenting voices, critics say.

The agreements "played an extremely negative role for the study of radiation effects in Chernobyl," says radiobiologist Natalia Mansurova. "Some information was withheld and selective methods were applied to exclude large numbers of radiation-affected people from being monitored for medium and long-term effects."

Dr. Mansurova calls the IAEA casualty figures for Chernobyl "plain lies." The researcher knows what she is talking about. She spent four-and-a-half years at Chernobyl studying the fallout and is the only surviving member of her team of 14 radiobiologists assigned to work there. Dr. Yablokov estimates that out of more than 800,000 "liquidators" who helped clean up Chernobyl, 125,000 died later. It is because of the collusive agreement between the IAEA and the WHO that the lessons of Chernobyl have not been learnt. "A total of 350 incidents of radiation leakage happened in the world before Chernobyl but no lessons were learnt," Dr. Mansurova said in an interview. "No model procedures were devised for dealing with the Fukushima-type disasters. They did not know what to do with the stricken Fukushima reactors, whether to pour water, sand or concrete."

The former deputy director of the Chernobyl nuclear plant, Alexander Kovalenko, also thinks that the unlearnt lessons of Chernobyl played an evil role in Fukushima. "The Japanese authorities and nuclear plant personnel ignored the information and technological lessons of Chernobyl," the expert said. "They were too slow in dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami and let a medium-level accident escalate into a full-scale catastrophe."

Even members of the Russian nuclear establishment admit that the Japanese authorities are manipulating information about the Fukushima fallout. "The situation with information about Fukushima is similar to what happened at Chernobyl," says Russia's former Nuclear Energy Minister Yevgeny Adamov. "During the first 24 hours after the Chernobyl blast, reports coming from the plant management said radiation levels were normal and efforts were on to cool the reactor, even though it already lay in ruins."

While Mr. Adamov thinks the Japanese authorities are justified in withholding "alarmist" information, critics, however, say they are exposing people to mortal risks. "We are seeing a repetition of Chernobyl: the dangers of radiation are being understated and this may lead to hundreds of thousands of people falling ill," says Dr. Yablokov.

Even after the Fukushima accident was awarded the top level 7 nuclear disaster rating, the same as Chernobyl, the IAEA continued to claim that the Japanese accident was no match for the Soviet reactor disaster.

However, Russian experts believe that Fukushima may eventually dwarf Chernobyl. "What happened at Chernobyl was essentially an atomic explosion that spewed radioactive fumes across Europe for 10 days," says the respected Russian biologist Zhores Medvedev, famous for exposing the 1957 nuclear disaster at the Mayak fuel storage in the Urals. "At the same time, the Chernobyl accident involved one reactor, whereas at Fukushima they have three stricken reactors plus four storages of spent fuel, which is even more dangerous because it contains long-living elements — cesium, strontium

and plutonium. Together they hold 25 times more radioactivity than Chernobyl and it has been leaking into the atmosphere, the ground and the sea for more than a month now and will keep on seeping for a very long time.”

Speaking at the Kiev conference, the IAEA chief promised to improve international safety standards in the nuclear power industry and ensure “full transparency about the risks of radiation”. Critics, however, urged changes in the way the IAEA itself operates.

“The IAEA's agreements with the WHO and other U.N. agencies must be annulled, so that we can honestly and objectively analyse the damage from radiation to man and environment, not only in the short-term period but also in the medium and long-term perspective,” says Natalia Mironova, thermodynamic engineer and anti-nuclear campaigner.

Experts are also calling for reforming the U.N. watchdog. “The IAEA status must be changed,” says Yuli Andreyev, former engineer at Chernobyl who later worked as deputy head of the Soviet Spetsatom nuclear clear-up energy. “This organisation consists only of people from the civilian and military nuclear industry. It is the unofficial headquarters of the global nuclear elite.