

From Chernobyl to Fukushima: What Will It Take?

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These are stressful times for the nuclear power industry, but we're far from seeing any white flag of surrender. A White House spokesman tells reporters that nuclear power "remains a part of the president's overall energy plan." Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists emphasizes that "the situation in Japan is dire. They are engaged in desperate measures to try to prevent the cores of three reactors from completely melting down." Then he adds lamely, "There will need to be additional safeguards if we plan to have safe nuclear power in this country."

Safeguards? We have two nuclear plants here in California, San Onofre and Diablo Canyon, built near major fault lines, and geologists agree we're on schedule for an 8-plus quake on the Richter scale. Nature bats last. At the other end of the country, the Shearon Harris nuclear power station in North Carolina is a repository for highly radioactive spent fuel rods from two other nuclear plants. It would not even require a quake or tsunami, only a moderately ingenious terrorist, to breach Shearon Harris's puny defenses and sabotage the cooling systems. A study by the Brookhaven Labs estimates that a pool fire there could cause 140,000 cancers, and contaminate thousands of square miles of land.

The benchmark catastrophe amid peacetime nuclear disasters remains the explosion in the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power station on April 26, 1986, in the Ukraine. Oddly enough, the nuclear apologists "witting or witless" aren't abashed by Chernobyl. They simply misrepresent or brazenly lie about its consequences in terms of death, illness and environmental poisoning. A notably shameful cover-up came in 2006, with a three-volume report issued just after the twentieth anniversary of the explosion, shaped by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation and the World Health Organization, plus many interested pronuclear parties such as the World Bank.

This report was a tremendous coup for the nuclear industrial/academic/political complex. True, it concluded that 9,000 victims had died or developed radiogenic cancers (some 4,000 children had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer), "but it will be difficult to determine the exact cause of the deaths." The overall tenor was that the health consequences of Chernobyl were not as bad as had been supposed. The report has had a malignant half-life. Even as Europe's energy commissioner, Günther Oettinger, termed Japan's nuclear disaster an "apocalypse," Fergus Walsh, the BBC's medical correspondent, comforted his audience with his précis of the 2006 report, explaining that by the time it came out Chernobyl had prompted only sixty deaths from cancer!

In 2009 the New York Academy of Sciences published *Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment*, a 327-page volume by three scientists, Alexey Yablokov and Vassily and Alexey Nesterenko, the definitive study to date. *Chernobyl* stresses that the cover-up began immediately. Official secrecy imposed by the Soviet government lasted three years, during which time an unknown number of people died from early leukosis. There were 830,000 "liquidators," as the cleanup workers were somewhat bizarrely termed, and for three years "it was officially forbidden to associate the diseases they were suffering from with radiation."

In the summary of his chapter "Mortality After the Chernobyl Catastrophe," Yablokov says flatly, "A detailed study reveals that 3.8-4.0% of all deaths in the contaminated territories of Ukraine and Russia from 1990 to 2004 were caused by the Chernobyl catastrophe". Since 1990, mortality among liquidators has exceeded the mortality rate in corresponding population groups. From 112,000 to 125,000 liquidators died before 2005 – that is, some 15% of the 830,000 members of the Chernobyl cleanup teams. The calculations suggest that the Chernobyl catastrophe has already killed several hundred thousand human beings in a population of several hundred million that was unfortunate enough to live in territories affected by the fallout."

Much of the report is devoted to the jump in incidence after Chernobyl of a huge range of diseases induced by radiation: diseases of the endocrine, blood, respiratory, nervous and lymphatic systems; compromised immune systems; chromosomal aberrations; congenital malformations in children; Down syndrome; urogenital tract diseases; reproductive disorders.

Some of the statistical graphs in Chernobyl-related diseases only recently began to rise, and will continue to do so. One 2007 study by M.V. Malko predicts an incidence of cancer caused by Chernobyl in Europe, including Belarus, Ukraine and European Russia, from 1986 to 2056, at 130,405 and fatalities at 89,851.

Set the desperate efforts to avoid apocalypse at the Tokyo Electric Power Company's Fukushima plant next to Chernobyl and its ongoing lethal aftermath. Compare the hundreds of square miles of abandoned land in Ukraine next to the evacuated zone, already twenty kilometers in radius on Japan's northeast coast. Think of southern California or North Carolina or... The United States has 104 nuclear plants. Nuclear expert Robert Alvarez writes that a single spent fuel rod pool "as in Fukushima or Shearon Harris" holds more cesium-137 than was deposited by all atmospheric nuclear weapons tests in the Northern Hemisphere combined, and an explosion in that pool could blast "perhaps three to nine times as much of these materials into the air as was released by the Chernobyl reactor disaster."

Significant sections of the environmental movement here, impelled by monomaniacal concern over the hypothesis of anthropogenic global warming, have made their shameful pact with the nuclear industry. It's over. Look at Chernobyl, look at Fukushima. There's no middle ground.

Alexander Cockburn

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P.S.

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