

Explosions at Russian military facilities leave eight dead

By Andrea Peters
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Seven workers killed in a nuclear military accident last Thursday in Russia's far north were buried on Monday. Details of the events surrounding the men's deaths are still largely unknown, with the Russian government providing few specifics about the explosion that took place at its naval facility near the town of Nyonoska on August 8.

According to Rosatom, the country's nuclear energy corporation, the blast was set off by the ignition of some form of liquid propellant, which experts say is a component of cruise or ballistic missiles, during a failed test. After several days, officials acknowledged that the test took place on an offshore platform in the White Sea.

In addition to the seven dead, more than a dozen others were injured.

Defense ministry officials initially denied that the explosion discharged any radioactive materials into the atmosphere, flatly contradicting reports by the Civil Protection Department in nearby Severodinsk—home to nearly 190,000 people—of a sharp spike in background radiation. It took several days before the Kremlin acknowledged that there had been a nuclear accident.

Maritime officials have since banned shipping in the White Sea's Dvina Bay for a month-long period. There are also reports that a military vessel designed to clean-up and store nuclear waste has sailed to the area. Online sources show images of emergency responders in hazardous materials suit working with victims and deploying to the area.

In Arkhangelsk, a city of 350,000 about 90 kilometers from the site of the accident, there has been a run on the pharmacies. Frightened residents are buying up iodine, which can help protect parts of the body from certain radioactive isotopes.

The experience of Chernobyl, the 1986 nuclear

accident in Soviet Ukraine that sickened thousands and threatened the world with catastrophe, is a recent memory for the people of the former USSR and no doubt shaping the response of Arkhangelsk's inhabitants to news of the explosion. The deceit and corruption that contributed to the Chernobyl disaster, well portrayed in an immensely popular recent HBO series, can be found in equal measure among the occupants of today's Kremlin.

Within the press there is widespread speculation as to which weapons system was being tested last week outside of Nyonoska, with the explosion happening as the Russian government presses to expand its nuclear capabilities in the face of growing threats from the United States. On August 3, Washington formally scrapped the decades-old Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

Last week's nuclear-test-gone-wrong underscores the immense dangers posed by both the American war drive and the frenzied efforts of Russia's ruling class to shore up its position in response. Even as it guts social spending for an increasingly discontented, impoverished population, the Kremlin is trying to arm itself to the teeth.

In early July a fire on the nuclear submarine Losharik in the Barents Sea killed 14 Russian naval officers. While the full details of the event have been kept from the public an aide to the commander of Russia's navy, Captain Sergei Pavlov, ominously remarked at the sailor's funeral that they had prevented a possible "planetary catastrophe."

Reports of the latest accident in Russia's far north come alongside news of a series of massive blasts at a military ammunitions site in southern Siberia. On August 5, and then again several days later, artillery stored in a warehouse near the city of Achinsk

exploded, killing one person and injuring more than 30.

The explosions destroyed homes in nearby villages, where shells littered the streets. Toxic smoke blanketed Achinsk. The government evacuated residents within a 20-kilometer zone around the base and declared a state of emergency. Aluminum producer Rusal, a major employer in the city of over 100,000 people, suspended operations at its local plant.

No explanation as to what caused the first explosion has been given, although for weeks the area has been engulfed in massive wildfires, which are burning uncontrolled throughout Siberia. According to authorities, the initial explosion on August 5 disabled the facility's protections against lightning strikes. When these hit a few days later, the second series of blasts occurred.

The wildfires that were likely the initial contributing factor to the disaster near Achinsk are a product of climate change and the gutting of fire management infrastructure and resources.

These military accidents come nineteen years to the day after the sinking of the Kursk submarine in the Barents Sea. On August 12, 2000, incompetence, indifference, budget cuts, and flagrant neglect by the Russian government led to the deaths of 118 sailors, 85 in an initial underwater explosion and 23 through slow suffocation.

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