

Questions continue over Russian nuclear accident

By Andrea Peters
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Questions surrounding the nature of the nuclear-military accident that occurred in Russia's far north last week continue. On August 8, an explosion at a military facility near the town of Nyonoksa killed seven people and injured more than a dozen others.

After initially denying that any radioactive substance had been leaked into the environment, government representatives were forced to acknowledge unusually high levels of background radiation in nearby Severodvinsk, as much as 16 times the normal level. Shipping in Dvina Bay, possibly the precise site of the accident, is now off limits for a month. Naval vessels equipped to handle radioactive waste have arrived in the area.

On Tuesday, a full five days after the explosion, officials issued and then retracted an order evacuating those living in close vicinity to the accident. Residents of Nyonoksa report that in subsequent days personnel in military uniforms arrived to gather information as to who was in the town on August 8. Doctors, possibly from Moscow, also appeared on the scene. Local authorities told journalists inquiring about these statements that such matters were in the hands of the federal ministry of health and they had no further information.

Greenpeace Russia maintains that the government is not being forthright about the scale and scope of the radiation spike in the area following the explosion. According to the environmental group, state agencies have not told the public that beta, as well as gamma, radiation was released and that Arkhangelsk, a city of 350,000 about 90 kilometers from Nyonoksa, also experienced a significant rise in radiation levels from August 9 to 11.

The Norwegian government is detecting trace amounts of radioactive iodine in Svanhøvd, near its

border with Russia, although it is not clear whether this is linked to events in Nyonoksa.

Residents in towns and cities near the accident are frightened and angry over the official effort to hide the incident and the lack of information about what happened and the dangers posed to the population. Adding to the fears is the news that emergency responders who initially treated victims have themselves been transferred to Moscow for medical care. Pharmacies in Arkhangelsk, where the media monthly per capita income is about \$500, have run out of iodine products, which can be used to treat certain types of radiation exposure.

"We remember Chernobyl," one local resident told a press outlet.

As concerns over the dangers posed by the accident continue, speculation mounts over what exactly happened at the military facility. The Kremlin has released very little information, stating only that the explosion occurred as part of a test and involved liquid propellant.

In recent years, the Putin government, facing military and geopolitical threats from the United States, has been working to rapidly modernize its nuclear arsenal, ensuring that it is capable of carrying out or responding to a first strike and obliterating its opponent.

Press commentary in both the US and Russia has focused on whether the accident had to do with testing of the nuclear-powered Burevestnik missile, also known as Skyfall. Such an armament, should it be successfully built, would have an unrestricted range, thereby removing any geographic limits on what could be targeted during a nuclear exchange. An alternative explanation of the explosion points to experimentation with nuclear-powered batteries, or what some have described as a mini, mobile nuclear reactor. Attempts

to create these kinds of nuclear capabilities have a decades-long history, with military scientists repeatedly abandoning their efforts due to the dangers and expenses involved.

Whatever the cause of the events on August 8, it is clear that the Russian ruling class—venal, corrupt, and having no mass base of popular support—is in a reckless and mad pursuit of ever-more lethal weapons, which it sees as the only possible means to oppose the US’ war drive against Moscow.

Around the same time as the accident near Nyonoksa, an ammunitions warehouse in Siberia exploded twice over the course of several days, killing one, injuring more than thirty, sending debris for miles, and causing mass evacuations. In early July, an accident on a nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea left fourteen dead, with the crew narrowly averting what one naval officer described as a “planetary catastrophe.”

The US government and American media have seized upon the latest incident to press forward with its anti-Russia campaign and lay the groundwork for pulling out of the last remaining nuclear armistice agreement with Moscow, the New START Treaty, which is set to expire in 2021.

“Some want to extend New START. Some are arguing in favor of creating something new. I’m not sure where it will go,” US Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman told *Ekho Moskvyy* radio station on August 14.

Speaking to *Voice of America* earlier this week, US national security advisor John Bolton denounced Russia for allegedly stealing the technology behind last week’s failed nuclear test from the United States.

“Although Russia’s economy is roughly the size of the Netherlands, it’s still spending enough on defense to not only modernize their nuclear arsenal, but to build new kinds of delivery vehicles—hypersonic glide vehicles, hypersonic cruise missiles—largely stolen from American technology.”

After having stated that the US was the source of Russia’s nuclear technology, Bolton preposterously went on to state, “And let’s be clear, nobody else is going to stop countries from getting nuclear weapons beside the United States.”

In early August, the US withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed in

1987. It will now start testing previously-banned missiles.

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