The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In U-Turn, Putin Seeks Nuclear Checks

By Roland Oliphant

March 15, 2011

Meteorologist Roman Chernov measuring radioactivity levels Tuesday in Vladivostok, where levels rose slightly but stayed within the normal range. **Yuri Maltsev**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin ordered checks at all Russian nuclear facilities and a review of plans to develop nuclear energy on Tuesday as the situation at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant deteriorated sharply.

"I'm asking the Energy Ministry, Rosatom and the Environment Ministry to analyze the current state of the nuclear industry and future plans for the industry," Putin told a meeting of senior officials, including Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko.

Putin's remarks represented a reversal from his insistence a day earlier that Russia had "no plans to change plans" for nuclear development after the Fukushima crisis, sparked by a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan on Friday.

A third explosion rocked Fukushima on Tuesday, emitting dangerous levels of radiation that caused Japanese authorities to order people within 20 to 30 kilometers of the plant to leave

the area or remain indoors.

Kiriyenko said there was "no danger" to the Russian Far East even in a worst-case scenario because the short-lived isotopes released into the atmosphere would have broken down before winds could carry them to Russian shores.

Radiation levels briefly rose above normal in Vladivostok, Russia's main Pacific port located 800 kilometers from Fukushima, in the early hours of Tuesday, but remained within safe levels and soon fell again, meteorologists said.

The Pacific Fleet, which is based in Vladivostok, was put on standby to assist in a possible evacuation of Sakhalin Island and a disputed chain of islands that Moscow seized during the waning days of World War II, known as the southern Kurils by Russia and the Northern Territories by Japan.

Greenpeace Russia director Ivan Blokov said Kiriyenko's assessment of the current threat to Russia agreed with a simulation of a similar accident commissioned by Greenpeace at the Biblis nuclear plant in Germany. But he warned against complacency.

"You can't rely on simulations — they're different plants," he said by telephone. "If the scenario follows the course of the simulation, then there would be no threat. But if things develop along another path, then God knows."

While the Biblis simulation suggested radiation would not spread far, it also showed that pollution in the area surrounding the stricken plant could be "even worse than Chernobyl," he said.

Kiriyenko also told the meeting that Japan had rebutted a Russian offer to send two veterans of the Chernobyl cleanup to help. "They've been sitting on the runway in Khabarovsk for 10 hours because the Japanese would not accept the plane," he said.

Despite the rebuff, Putin invited the Japanese judo team and their families to Russia for training and ordered the Emergency Situations Ministry to send more aid.

While the review requested by Putin is likely to examine Rosatom's extensive domestic and foreign nuclear building programs, but Rosatom officials appeared to pre-empt the outcome of the report Tuesday, vigorously dismissing any suggestion that policy should be adjusted.

"Our position is very clear: Russian technology has been tested and proven more than once in such situations," Kiriyenko's spokesman Sergei Novikov said.

For evidence he pointed to the Russian-built Kudankulam plant in India, which survived a 2005 tsunami, and the Soviet-built Medzamor plant in Armenia, which survived a 6.9-magnitude quake that struck the then-Soviet republic in 1988 and killed 25,000.

Although Soviet authorities shut it down the following year citing safety concerns, its Reactor No. 2 was restarted to meet an energy deficit in 1995, and with the help of anti-seismic safety feature, "it's still running today," Novikov said.

But Vladimir Kuznetsov, a member of Rosatom's public council, said "the Armenian reactor is old" and an earthquake on a similar scale to that which hit Japan could be "very bad," Interfax reported

"The lack of an independent watchdog is one of the most serious problems with Russia's nuclear industry," said Oleg Dvoinikov, editor of the Proatom.ru web site, speaking shortly before Putin requested a review.

Russia plans to spend billions of dollars on replacing its 32 mostly Soviet-built nuclear power plants over the next few decades.

Rosatom's export arm, Atomstroiexport, is currently building five nuclear plants abroad and has secured agreements to build 30 more.

That business could be threatened if Fukushima moves public opinion against nuclear power in the same way the Chernobyl blast did in 1986.

On Monday, Bulgaria requested improved safety standards at a power plant it has ordered from Atomstroiexport.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, who kicked off a two-day visit to Moscow on Tuesday, said he would make a similar request.

Shreyans Kumar Jain, chairman of the Nuclear Power Corp. of India, said the Japanese disaster could be "a big dampener" on India's program, Bloomberg reported.

But Novikov flat-out denied that fear of a nuclear threat would trump energy needs.

"Forty percent of the cost of a nuclear plant is the safety system. If a client says, 'We're ready to pay for some additional safety measures,' for example to protect against the treat of a tsunami, then that can be worked into the project. It will just cost more money," said Novikov, who refused to confirm whether the company had received such requests from other customers.

As if to prove the point, Rosatom finally sealed a deal with Belarus to build the country's first nuclear plant on Tuesday. Putin attended the signing ceremony in Minsk.

Rosatom's bullishness is mirrored by its main competitors. General Electric, which also hopes to sell reactors to India, won't change its plans for the country after the Japan accident, chief executive officer Jeffrey Immelt told Bloomberg.

Critics also say the lack of independent oversight of the nuclear industry has allowed Rosatom to exploit its position for financial gain.

"For example, they're spending 243 billion rubles ($8 billion) on a second reactor at the Voronezh plant," said Bulat Nigmatulin, first deputy general director of the Institute for Natural Monopolies Problems and a former deputy nuclear energy minister. "In the West that would cost $2.5 billion. Because they have a monopoly they can charge any price they like."

Other critics of nuclear energy have vowed to challenge the assumption that there is "no alternative" to nuclear.

Nigmatulin would not be drawn on whether the lack of competition also makes Rosatom's plants more dangerous. But he said it would be wrong to dismiss nuclear power out of hand.

"Of course, it will affect global public opinion. China, India, and Iran and Turkey — which are both in earthquake zones — will want to review standards. Some proposed stations may be moved back from the coast. But in the end the demand for energy will prevail," Nigmatulin said.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/15/in-u-turn-putin-seeks-nuclear-checks-a5640