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Anonymous Letter Prompts New Investigation of Nuclear Plant

By Roland Oliphant

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The ventilation center of the Mayak plant's storage facility. The plant has a patchy record — it was the site of the 1957 Kyshtym nuclear accident, the Soviet Union's worst nuclear accident after Cher **Carl Anderson**

Deputy Chief Prosecutor Yury Zolotov on Friday ordered a re-examination of a case of criminal negligence at the Mayak nuclear processing facility after local media received an anonymous letter warning of a "nuclear Armageddon" at the facility.

But Rosatom and the plant's management say they are the victims of a smear campaign connected to a business dispute and have threatened legal action.

The scandal broke when regional news organizations received a letter addressed to "the global public, [President] Dmitry Medvedev, [Prime Minister] Vladimir Putin, the Rosatom management and the media" last Wednesday.

The letter claimed that counterfeit Chinese piping in the plant's cooling and "special sewage" system would "not last another two years" and was "on the verge of destruction."

The authors, who claimed to be "workers from Mayak," said they were writing anonymously for their own safety.

"The natural disasters and technological accidents of the past are nothing compared with the nuclear Armageddon that awaits us!" the authors declared.

The allegations are not new — the letter referred to claims originally made by a Chelyabinsk blogger in 2009.

The Prosecutor General's Office for the Urals Federal District said in a statement on its web site Friday that Zolotov had ordered prosecutors to "re-examine the decision" to close the original criminal investigation into the use of counterfeit equipment in repair work at Mayak.

Mayak, near the town of Ozersk in the Chelyabinsk region, is Russia's primary nuclear reprocessing facility, producing fuel for nuclear reactors in Russia and abroad and reprocessing spent nuclear fuel from civilian and military reactors.

It has a patchy record — it was the site of the 1957 Kyshtym nuclear accident, the Soviet Union's worst nuclear accident after Chernobyl. In 2003 it briefly lost its operating license over fears it was leaking waste into local rivers.

But Mayak's management insists that it has cleaned up its act, protesting that the letter's "brazen and baseless charges" undermine "its well-deserved reputation as one of the largest and most reliable [facilities] in the nuclear and defense industries of Russia."

State nuclear monopoly Rosatom maintains that the Chinese pipes were chosen because they came up cheaper in a tender, and that repeated tests have proven them to "meet or exceed" the standards of similar grades of Russian piping.

They also point out that the "special sewage system" is not connected to the reactors' cooling system.

The plant's management said in a statement that it is considering legal action "to defend its reputation," but did not say whom it would sue.

Rosatom, however, suggested it was dealing with a business dispute.

"We believe that the anonymous letter is an indecent tool being used by one of our contractors with whom the company is engaged in a court dispute," the company said in its statement.

A company spokesman refused to name the specific contractor Rosatom suspects of sending the letter.

Alexander Podoprigora, a Chelyabinsk-based political scientist, wrote on his LiveJournal blog that the culprit was local businessman Vladimir Kosazhevsky, whose companies have been locked in a legal dispute with Mayak since 2009.

The Arbitration Court's online database shows that Mayak is suing YuUMZ for nearly four million rubles ($142,000) for breach of a construction contract.

There are six other active claims by Rosatom affiliates against Kosazhevsky's Southern Urals Machine Building Factory (known by its Russian acronym YuUMZ) in the Chelyabinsk Arbitration Court.

Mayak is also locked in a dispute with the Russian Postal Service over rights to a nonresidential property in Ozersk.

Podoprigora suggested that Kosazhevsky was looking to become manager of the plant himself. Kosazhevsky denied the allegations in local media.

It is impossible to verify the source of the letter. Editors at the Novy-Region news agency said they received the letter Wednesday and published a report based on it the same day.

Editors at the news agency said they had no idea who the sender was and that messages to the sender's e-mail address had not been answered. E-mails from The Moscow Times to the originating address also went unanswered by Sunday evening.

It is not the first time Rosatom has been targeted by anonymous whistleblowers. In December 2009 the web site ProAtom.ru published an anonymous letter detailing alleged corruption in the construction of the new Novovoronezh nuclear plant.

And a former Rosatom employee who approached The Moscow Times claimed that such corner-cutting was endemic throughout the nuclear complex and that a serious nuclear disaster as a result was a real possibility.

The source said a faulty water pump at the Kalinin nuclear plant in the Tver region was not replaced.

He said he witnessed the failure of a pump at the station's new Reactor Unit 3, which occurred because of a lack of lubricating oil while the unit was under construction in 2004 and 2005.

Instead of replacing it, the management did the paperwork to suggest a new pump had been acquired and installed. In reality, he said, the damaged pump was simply removed, driven around the site and reinstalled.

Water pump failure was a key cause of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The source, who says he worked on the construction of the Kalinin and other power plants between 2003 and 2007, would only speak anonymously and was unable to provide documentary proof of his story.

Rosatom said it could not comment on the individual case, but said it has a hotline on which anyone can report allegations of corruption within the company. A spokesman offered to pass the allegations on to the department that verifies such claims.

"Rosatom is very often accused of corruption by those who for one reason or another have failed to make it through the procedure for a tender or have lost because of inflated prices,"

a spokesman said.

But while Rosatom blames unscrupulous business partners, environmentalists say a lack of oversight makes it impossible to tell whether the firm is telling the truth.

Vladimir Slivyak, co-chairman of the EcoDefense environmental group, said the story from Mayak tallied with rumors that have been coming out of the industry for years.

"The biggest problem seems to be with new construction," he said. "That's where the greatest opportunities for pocketing money are."

"It's almost impossible for us to verify what is going on; perhaps it is simply a business dispute. But without an independent watchdog it is impossible to tell."

The nuclear industry is technically overseen by a department of Rostekhnadzor, the Federal Service for Environmental, Technological and Atomic Inspection. But environmentalists say it has lost its teeth since being subsumed into the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry in 2008.

"Formally, they are responsible for ensuring safety. In practice, Rosatom is essentially self-regulating," Slivyak said. "And that's the main problem."

A report produced by Transparency International and EcoDefense in November found multiple violations of procurement standards in 40 percent of 200 procurement deals studied, and found the company's practices were effectively unregulated.

Rosatom at the time rejected the findings.

Bulat Nigmatulin, a former deputy atomic energy minister who has long positioned himself as a critic of the current Rosatom management, said only an independent inquiry could settle the matter.

"It could be nothing; but the problem is, at the moment, we only have Rosatom's word for it," he said. "There should be a public commission, including members of Federal Service for Environmental, Technological and Atomic Inspection and the FSB, to investigate the claims. And if they find any evidence of wrongdoing, there should be criminal prosecution," he said by telephone.

"If the commission found nothing, then I would believe them. But the main thing is that everything should be public," he said.

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