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Armenia's Nuclear Plant Is a Ticking Time Bomb

By Paul Rimple

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While radiation continues to leak into the atmosphere from Japan's Fukushima Daiichi power plant, Armenian officials remain confident that their antiquated nuclear power plant, Metsamor, can ride out any Japanese-sized tremor. Of course, they have little choice but to believe in its infallibility. Metsamor provides Armenia with 40 percent of its energy consumption, and the country has very few alternative energy resources.

Without Metsamor, Armenia would black out like it did following the huge earthquake of 1989, which killed some 25,000 around the city of Gyumri, 100 kilometers away. Withstanding tremors measuring 5 or 6 on the Richter scale, Metsamor was shut down. As a result, everything made of wood disappeared in Yerevan to be used for heating fuel.

In 1996, one reactor resumed operations with Western financial assistance for upgrades. Then in 2003, Russia's state-run power monopoly, Unified Energy System, took over operations in return for Moscow's cancellation of a $40 million debt.

With Armenia once again electrified, many in the West believe that operating an antiquated nuclear power plant in an active seismic zone is unwise. The European Union and World Bank have pressed Yerevan to shut Metsamor down, but to no avail.

In a recent National Geographic News article, Antonia Wenisch of the Austrian Institute of Applied Ecology in Vienna said Metsamor was "among the most dangerous nuclear plants still in operation."

Azerbaijan has been quick to castigate Yerevan. At a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session, Rafael Huseynov, a member of Azerbaijan's delegation, distributed a document signed by 30 members of parliament from 20 European countries. Attributing Armenia's nuclear energy program to aggression against Azerbaijan, the document also claims that Armenia buries nuclear waste in occupied Azeri territory. While this claim is unfounded, Armenia has been forced to store spent fuel onsite for 22 years because of a blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Additionally, fuel must be flown in from Russia since there is no longer a rail connection between the two countries.

Turkey is the only other country in the region that recognizes that Metsamor is a nuclear dinosaur sitting on shaky ground. Georgia and Iran are virtually mum on the issue as if only a disaster can make them realize a hazard exists. Only then will they recall that the Chernobyl reactor did not need the help of an earthquake to explode and spew radioactive fallout across the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and parts of Scandinavia.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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