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Ukraine Needs Aid to Finish Chernobyl Cover and Prevent Ecological Disaster

By The Moscow Times

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A radioactive sign hanging on barbed wire outside a café in Pripyat, an abandoned city in northern Ukraine.

The greatest threat to Europe amid instability in Ukraine may not come from a prolonged conflict in the country's restive east, but a failure to complete construction on a new sarcophagus over the still-hot Chernobyl nuclear power plant due to a lack of funding.

German news agency DPA on Tuesday cited unidentified German officials as saying Ukraine needs an additional 615 million euros ($796 million) to complete construction of the new sarcophagus, which is currently only about halfway done.

"The completion of the new protective case for the sarcophagus is essential to safely enclose the stricken reactor and to allow for its removal," German Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks was quoted as saying by DPA.

The Chernobyl nuclear power plant made history in 1986, when reactor No. 4 went into meltdown, resulting in the world's largest nuclear disaster. The fallout was only contained through the sacrifice of Soviet firemen, who died constructing an ad-hoc sarcophagus over the molten slab of radioactive waste — a measure that was always intended only as a stopgap. Today, the original sarcophagus remains and could collapse at any minute, a potential ecological disaster that would impact all of Europe.

In 1997, the G7 nations convened to address the threat of the Chernobyl sarcophagus' collapse. The end result of that meeting was an agreement to set up a $768 million fund to finance the construction of a new steel sarcophagus over the entire site. French nuclear conglomerate Novark began work on the structure and has completed about half of it, according to DPA.

Germany is currently chairing the G7, and plans to discuss the issue of funding the project to completion during a mid-October meeting of the group on nuclear safety. Until then, work on the reactor's newer and safer container will be halted.

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