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Risk of Nuclear Accident in Ukraine Increasing This Winter, Atomic Safety Regulators Say

By Reuters

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The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant sarcophagus. **Mattias Hill (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

The risk of a nuclear accident in Ukraine is increasing this winter, nuclear safety regulators representing 38 countries said on Monday, urging Russia to stop its attacks on the country's power infrastructure.

Moscow has stepped up its drone and missile attacks on Ukrainian energy installations, such as plants, power lines and electricity substations, a system already weakened after nearly five years of conflict.

"Together we... express our deep concern about the increasing risks to nuclear safety arising from Russia's war against Ukraine, and its continued attacks on the country's energy infrastructure," the bodies said in a joint statement seen by Reuters ahead of publication.

"Together, [we] see an urgent need for Russia to cease attacks against Ukraine's nuclear facilities and the energy infrastructure essential to their safe operation."

The regulators' key concern is that, without a stable electricity supply from the grid, it becomes more and more difficult for Ukrainian nuclear plants to keep their nuclear material cool and avoid a meltdown.

If that were to occur, there could be releases of radioactivity into the air as happened during the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, considered to be the world's worst civil nuclear accident.

The accident spread iodine-131, cesium-134 and cesium-137 across parts of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and northern and central Europe.

The bodies behind the call are HERCA, the Heads of the European Radiological Protection Competent Authorities; WENRA, the Western European Nuclear Regulators Association; and NORA, the Heads of the Nordic Radiation Safety Authorities.

Together they represent 38 countries, including all EU countries, the U.S., Britain, Canada and Japan, among others.

'Possible to stop this situation if we act'

In an interview, Per Strand, the head of HERCA and NORA, said Russian attacks had become deadlier in recent weeks, for example, by using drones that carry bigger payloads and are more precise in their targeting.

"Because of this new tactic of the Russians, ... clearly the highest risk will be this winter for a nuclear accident," he told Reuters.

The worst-case scenario, he said, would be a nationwide blackout of the Ukrainian power grid that would affect Ukraine's nine producing nuclear reactors simultaneously.

"Nine reactors at the same time with the potential of [radioactive] releases would be quite a severe situation," he said.

He stressed that the situation could be avoided if action was taken now and Russia was pressured to stop its attacks on energy infrastructure.

If not, European countries must work together on their emergency preparedness to tackle the possible consequences of a nuclear accident, he said.

Four nuclear plants

On Saturday, the International Atomic Energy Agency said military activity had caused instability in Ukraine's electricity in the preceding week, resulting in power reductions at some operating units in the country's nuclear power plants.

Ukraine has four nuclear power plants, of which three are in operation, providing some 80% of the power used this winter. Its fourth, Zaporizhzhia, Europe's largest, is under Russian control in an area close to the front line.

It is not currently producing electricity but relies on external power to keep the nuclear material cool and avoid a meltdown. The plant's equipment is powered by electricity supplied from Ukraine.

Since the start of the war, Zaporizhzhia has lost off-site power 27 times, the IAEA said on Saturday, forcing it to switch to emergency diesel generators. Since late March, the plant has relied on a single off-site power line, the IAEA said.

Russia and Ukraine accuse each other of striking the nuclear plant and of severing power lines leading to it.

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