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Soviet Chemical Plant Threat to Ukrainian City

Posted: 04/26/2012 12:17 pm

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When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, it left behind in the Ukrainian city of Gorlovka [an abandoned chemical factory](#) awash with leaking drums and pipes containing TNT and other dangerous chemicals.

Local officials in the city of 300,000 people were not even sure what was being produced in the plant -- possibly munitions or even nerve gas -- because the factory was "secret" under the Soviet regime. And the Soviet Union took some of its secrets with it.

The 400-acre site is in the middle of the city, creating concern that if an explosion were to take place, the toll of injuries could be catastrophic; or if toxic chemicals leak into the water, health could be threatened.

An expert from Blacksmith Institute, an NGO working with the Ukrainian government to clean up the facility, said there is a 5 percent chance per year that there will be an explosion at the site.

Yet plans to clean up the plant have been slow in getting official approval. The government has balked at paying off an engineering institute that did a detailed survey of the site and drew up plans to neutralize the threat to people.

Gorlovka, in the eastern Ukraine near the border of Russia, is not the only city facing threats from abandoned Cold War plants. Since the Soviet Union vanished, Russian, Ukrainian, and other former Soviet authorities have simply walked away from chemical, weapons and even nuclear sites, leaving ill-equipped local authorities to cope with a witch's brew of deadly pollution threats.

The Ukraine government is especially aware of the risks from the site because in June and July, many thousands of sports fans are expected to descend on the nearby city of Donetsk, a 40-minute drive away, to view European soccer championship games. The last thing the government wants is an environmental disaster to drive away the fans.

Already a major cleanup has taken place. Tons of TNT have been removed from leaking barrels and rusting sheds into strong new metal drums, ready for shipment to burning sites in Poland.

The site also contains mononitrochlorobenzene (MNCB), rarely used in the West. Ukrainian authorities say the chemical was used for dyes, paints and pharmaceuticals. It is a carcinogen and one teaspoon can kill a human being. But one U.S. chemical industry expert said the chemical can be easily changed into nerve gas.

In the past few weeks some progress has been made in getting the Ukrainian government to move toward paying the \$300,000 owed to the engineering institute that did a comprehensive survey of the abandoned plant and wrote up a detailed, step-by-step plan to clean up the site. Tons of chemicals have already been trucked to Poland for incineration and tons more have been transferred from leaking containers into more secure drums. But 30 tons of TNT, plus other chemicals remain on site, clogging up pipes, leaking from barrels and flowing into groundwater. Blacksmith has already obtained \$650,000 from the European Community, the Swedish aid agency, and the Swiss Green Cross agency to do the actual clean up.

But the engineering institute says it can't release its detailed survey and design to clean the site until it gets paid.

"This is the worst case of leaving dangerous materials in the center of a city after the Soviet Union collapsed," said Andrew McCartor, a Blacksmith official. "It is a terrible toxic legacy."

On a recent visit to the site -- which is so toxic and dangerous local officials were reluctant to enter -- McCartor found buildings collapsing over tanks and pipes laden with explosives and chemicals.

Ukraine authorities must find a way to pay the engineering fees and work with the international donor community to clean up this site before a grave accident occurs on the magnitude of another [Bhopal](#), the worst industrial accident in modern history, in which more than 2,000 Indians died from a cyanide gas leak in 1984.

Ben Barber is a freelance journalist and a communications adviser to Blacksmith Institute.

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