

NUCLEAR SHORTS

Radioactive Tourism at Chernobyl

PRIPYAT, Ukraine — Tourists are participating in what may be the strangest vacation excursion available in the former Soviet Union — the packaged tour of the Chernobyl exclusion zone, scene of the worst civilian disaster of the nuclear age. Inside a 19-mile radius around Chernobyl's reactor number 4, with its radioactive legacy from the explosions on April 26, 1986, everything has been abandoned. The tour includes visits to a graveyard of ambulances, armored vehicles, trucks, aircraft and helicopters used to fight Chernobyl's fires, where roughly 2,000 radioactive machines are parked. Tourists must obey rules while visiting the radioactively contaminated site. Visitors must stay on concrete and asphalt and not touch anything. Levels of radiation in the tour areas vary from 15 to several hundred microrentgens an hour; a lethal dose of radiation ranges from 300 to 500 roentgens an hour (a microrentgen is one-millionth of a roentgen). Dangers at these levels, according to the tourist agency, lie in long-term exposure. The Chernobyl site opened for tours in 2002 attracting only a few takers. In 2004, 870 people toured the site. A one-day excursion costs between \$200 and \$400, including transportation and a meal. Forty-five thousand people used to live in the exclusion zone.

— *New York Times*, June 15, 2005

Belgian Parliament Wants U.S. Nukes Out of Europe

BRUSSELS — In July, the Belgian House of Representatives adopted a resolution on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, calling for the withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear weapons based in Europe. The resolution also seeks to exclude nuclear weapons from the common EU security policy. This is the second time that a parliamentary assembly in Europe has demanded the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons. The Belgian Senate approved a similar resolution April 21, 2005. An estimated 480 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons are deployed in Belgium, Germany, England, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. The U.S. is currently the only country to station nuclear weapons on the territory of other countries.

Also in July, New Zealand's parliament voted to maintain the country's ban on nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships which forbids them in its ports. A representative of a small, right-wing party had proposed lifting the ban, arguing that it had cost New Zealand a free trade agreement with the U.S., but the bill was voted down. — *For Mother Earth Press*, July 15; & *Global Security Newswire*, July 28, 2005

UN Alert as Nuclear Bomb Plans & Parts Go Missing

VIENNA, Austria — Electronic drawings taken from weapons smugglers that give comprehensive details of how to build nuclear bombs have vanished and could be put up for sale on the black market, according to UN investigators.

The blueprints, running to hundreds of pages, show how to make centrifuges for enriching uranium. In addition, the investigators have been unable to trace key components for uranium centrifuge rigs.

"We have no evidence they were destroyed. One possibility is another client," said a senior UN official. "We just don't know where they are." Inspectors at the UN's nuclear authority, the International Atomic Energy Agency, have been investigating the worst nuclear smuggling racket ever uncovered, headed by Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan who is now under house arrest. The operation was discovered two years ago to be selling sensitive nuclear technology to Libya and Iran. — *The Guardian*, June 9, 2005

UN Says Uranium in Iran Is Not Evidence of Weapons

VIENNA — The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency has found that particles of highly enriched uranium (HEU) found in Iran were from imported Pakistani equipment and not part of a secret weapons program, something Iranian officials have said for years. The Bush White House, which has declared that Iran is "evil," charged that the HEU was evidence that Iran was experimenting with nuclear weapons development. A phantom nuclear weapons program was the top scare tactic used by Bush's Administration as a pretext for its 2003 war on Iraq. Equally flimsy charges by Bush that Tehran has a weapons program were the basis for the president's recent declaration that he would not rule out a U.S. invasion. U.S. experts and a Sept. 2 UN report have confirmed the IAEA's finding, backing Iran's position.

— *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Sept. 2; *New York Times*, Aug. 26 & *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 21, 2005

Saudia Arabia Exempt From Nuclear Inspections

VIENNA — The U.N. atomic watchdog agency in June approved a deal that exempts Saudi Arabia from nuclear inspections despite serious misgivings about the arrangement in an era of increased concern over proliferation.

Although the Saudis resisted Western pressure to compromise and allow some form of monitoring, the board of the International Atomic Energy Agency signed on to the agreement.

Called the Small Quantities Protocol, the deal allows countries whose nuclear equipment or activities are thought

to be below a minimum threshold to submit a declaration instead of undergoing inspections.

— *Associated Press*, June 16, 2005

Nevada Test Site Building Sealed After Containment Chamber Fire

LAS VEGAS, Nevada — A building at the Nevada Test Site remained sealed and an investigation was under way after a gray powder burst into flames while being mechanically handled in a radioactivity containment chamber. Four workers in protective gear were inspecting and sorting transuranic [plutonium-contaminated] waste using machines inside a clear protective "glove box" when the powder caught fire. "Everything tells us the radioactivity was contained within the glove box within the building," said National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) spokesman Darwin Morgan. He then alluded to wider contamination saying, "It's going to be a very slow process reentering the building." The NNSA could not identify the powder, which was in a 55-gallon drum sent from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. It was being "characterized" at the Nevada Test Site for shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad, New Mexico. Transuranic waste typically includes clothing, equipment and pipes contaminated with plutonium during nuclear weapons production.

— *Las Vegas Sun*, June 10, 2005

Workers, Homes, FedEx, Hit With Rad Contamination

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico — A worker in the Los Alamos National Lab contaminated himself, his home, the homes of friends and family, co-workers, a lab in Pennsylvania and eleven of its employees, as well as a FedEx truck with americium-241. The contamination, not discovered for 11 days, was found when a package arrived at Los Alamos where improper handling spread the radioactivity. A decontamination team moved in to recover everything poisoned with the americium. The deadly isotope was found on workers' skin and in homes, cars and work spaces. Officials at Los Alamos said the amount of americium carried off site was a fraction of the radioactivity contained in a typical residential smoke detector. They claimed that the low levels of contamination found at the employees' homes didn't pose a risk. The federal EPA says americium-241 poses a significant health risk, including cancer, if inhaled or swallowed. Eleven workers handled the package sent to Pennsylvania via FedEx as a "nonhazardous, domestic unclassified shipment." Americium-241 is produced when plutonium is bombarded with neutrons inside a reactor. With a half-life of 432 years, it is radioactively dangerous for 4,320 years. The isotope is mostly used in smoke detectors.

— *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Aug. 2; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 27 & Aug. 9; & *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 11, 2005

Alarm Over Russian Radioactive Waste Site

MOSCOW — Russia has approved and plans to build an international storage site for nuclear waste in spite of petitions signed by three million opponents. Aleksandr Rumyantsev, head of the Federal Nuclear Power Agency, presented the plan at a conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in July. Rumyantsev said, "It is a good idea to have the facility in Russia, partly because of our space, and partly because we are the only country whose law allows it to import nuclear waste." Since 2001, the import and storage of nuclear waste from other countries has been permitted, though only temporarily. Russia imports small amounts of waste from former Eastern bloc countries



Russia is considering two sites for long-term storage of international radioactive waste, Krasnoyarsk and Chelyabinsk. Both are underlined in the map above.

including Hungary. The IAEA supports the idea and now it's a question of whether the Russian people will accept it. Two sites are being considered for long-term storage of deadly waste — the Zelenogorsk nuclear storage facility near Krasnoyarsk and the Mayak facility near Chelyabinsk, which environmentalists claim is the most radioactive place on earth after a nuclear waste disaster there in 1956.

— *Times of London*, July 15, 2005

Bechtel Corp. Settles Lawsuit Regarding Phantom Waste

RICHLAND, Wash. — Bechtel, the corporation contracted to cleanup the Hanford Reservation, agreed to pay the U.S. government \$125,000 to settle law suits over contamination that occurred as workers dug up old burial grounds at the

site in eastern Washington. Before 2004, much of the clean-up work along the Columbia River required removing soil contaminated by radioactive liquids. But when workers began excavating burial sites they found all sorts of radioactively contaminated material not listed in record books. In one incident workers unexpectedly unearthed items contaminated with plutonium, one of them an old safe containing a bottle holding plutonium-laced liquid. The safe also was contaminated with plutonium. In another situation workers found a large pile of waste that had been dug up and was being sorted. The two technicians were not wearing respiratory protection and were exposed to airborne plutonium.

— *Tri-City Herald*, Richland, Washington, Aug. 10, 2005

EPA Proposing Radiation Exposure Limits

WASHINGTON, DC — Conceding there's no way to know what life will be like in a million years, the EPA nevertheless proposed limits in August on how much radiation a person should be exposed to from a nuclear waste dump in the far distant future. The suggested exposure limit of 15 millirems (mR) a year for 10,000 years (for people near the as-yet-unworkable Yucca Mountain facility in Nevada), would be allowed to increase to 350 mR/year for up to 1 million years. The 350 mR exposure is over three times what is allowed from nuclear facilities today. A standard chest X-ray is about 10 mR. A Federal Appeals court said last year that the EPA standard — which is supposed to ensure that nearby residents won't be harmed by leaking radioactivity from the dump — was inadequate because it didn't establish exposure limits beyond 10,000 years. The court pointed out that peak radiation released from the proposed high-level waste dump would not occur until well after 10,000 years. Once the standard is made final after a comment period, the NRC will decide whether the Yucca design is adequate. Craig Stevens, a spokesman for the Energy Department, said the administration is firmly committed to pushing ahead with the Yucca project. It plans to submit a formal application for a license to the NRC next year.

— *Associated Press*, August 9, 2005

Fake Documents Got Workers Past High Security

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Sixteen undocumented construction workers with fake "green cards" were able to enter the Y-12 nuclear weapons complex near Knoxville, Tennessee because of poor security. The DOE was embarrassed to find that "official use only" documents were left lying around in a construction trailer accessed by the unauthorized workers. Y-12, officially known as a "National Security Complex," makes parts for nuclear warheads and is the principal government storehouse for weapons-grade uranium. It is supposedly one of the most highly secured sites in the world. The workers have been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

— *Guardian Newspapers*, June 20, 2005

Island Police Carry Radiation Meters

WESTTISBURY, Mass. — Police on Martha's Vineyard have begun carrying radiation meters in case of a radiation accident at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth or a nuclear calamity in New York City. The radiation monitors are the size of a contact lens case and cost \$160 each. They were donated to the police by a group called Physicians for Civil Defense. Radiation warnings come in the form of chirps, with one chirp meaning a person has about 40 hours to get to a safe place before radiation sickness would begin while a series of 10 chirps would mean a person may get sick within a few minutes. Martha's Vineyard has no highway connecting it with the mainland, and ferries head straight into any radiation that may be carried from Pilgrim by prevailing winds. — *Cape Cod Times*, Aug. 12, 2005

Kennedy White House Talked of Nuclear Attacks on Non-Nuclear China

BOSTON, Mass — In May 1963, former defense secretary Robert McNamara in a meeting with President Kennedy said, about repelling a possible Chinese attack on India, "... we would have to use nuclear weapons." In newly declassified audio tapes of the discussions, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is also heard saying, "I would hate to think that we would fight this on the ground in a non-nuclear war." The spectacular disclosure shows how dramatically different actual U.S. nuclear war plans were from the official public policy of "deterrence." Neither China nor India were threatening to attack the U.S. and neither had nuclear weapons at the time. The content of the tapes stunned Indian analysts, one of whom said, "I'm sure it will have antennae up in China."

— *New York Times*, Aug. 26, 2005

Korea's Hiroshima

SEOUL, South Korea — Thousands of atomic bomb victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were Korean nationals. Most were forced laborers working in Japanese armament factories. Others were landless farmers looking for work. A group called Peace Project Network aims to win compensation from Japan