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Nuclear Reactors Can Become Dirty Bombs — And You Don't Even Need a War

Like all nuclear power plants, Ukraine's reactors are inherently dangerous pre-deployed nuclear weapons

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Global Research, October 28, 2022
Beyond Nuclear 26 October 2022

Region: Europe, Russia and FSU
Theme: Intelligence, Militarization and WMD

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The ever more alarming stories about the Ukrainian reactors embroiled in the Russian invasion potentially being used as dirty bombs drives home one clear message: ***nuclear power plants — and their mounting inventory of high- level nuclear waste — are inherently dangerous and their use should be permanently discontinued.***

The six-reactor Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, now within the territory "annexed" by Russia, has long been in extreme danger of a major disaster. It has suffered shelling and missile strikes close to and on the site and essential offsite power has been lost on several occasions. The workforce has been under extreme duress since the Russians forcibly occupied the plant on March 4, risking human error. Some may even have been harmed.

However, the massive inventory of radioactive waste at the site — mostly contained in vulnerable dry storage casks located outside fortified protection — present an enormous danger on many fronts.

The use of the plant as a "dirty bomb" would involve the planting of powerful explosives at the individualized dry cask site that, when detonated, would disperse radioactive materials that would contaminate the land, water, air and surrounding populations.

But if one or more reactors was shelled and containment was breached, a massive radiation release from the reactors and fuel storage pools could also contaminate a potentially even wider area. This danger, along with the loss of power, has been present since the war began.

"The reality all of this exposes is that nuclear power plants are inherently dangerous

> with their large inventories of radioactive materials that must be protected for hundreds to thousands of years from escaping into the environment," said Paul Gunter, Director of Reactor Oversight at Beyond Nuclear.
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> "The only reason there is such justifiably high anxiety right now about the possibility of these plants being used as dirty bombs — as well as the very real threat of a missile attack — is because of the lethal radioactivity that would be released, sickening and killing countless people and contaminating land and water indefinitely," Gunter continued.
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> "This sends a clear message that the risks of using this already highly expensive form of electricity generation is, and was always, a mistake," he said.

A war adds greater levels of risk to nuclear plant safety already present on a routine working day. The loss of power, human error, equipment degradation, fire, and of course a terrorist attack (actual or cyber) are all threats that could destroy or melt down a reactor anywhere at any time.

> "Given that nuclear power is too expensive, too slow, too inflexible and comes with significant safety, security and proliferation dangers, the message could not be more obvious," Gunter continued. "For the sake of our health, wellbeing and the survival of the planet, we must transition rapidly away from nuclear power and dirty fossil fuels to flexible and fast renewable energy, energy efficiency and conservation. All three of these, when combined, are demonstrably able to meet our current and future energy needs."

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