

Nuclear Fallout Persists in Kazakhstan

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Effects of Soviet atom bomb blasts still affecting population around disused test site. Kazakhstan's nuclear test zone has lain deserted for the last 20 years and largely forgotten by the outside world, but experts say radiation will continue to be a health risk until the huge site is cleaned up thoroughly.

The testing ground was closed for use in 1991. This month, the international Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organisation is running a series of trials at the Semipalatinsk site to test equipment that can identify and give the location of nuclear explosions.

Semipalatinsk was clearly chosen for the experiments because some of the testing can be done for real, for example checking radiation levels in the soil and atmosphere. In Kazakhstan, it is also being seen as a tribute to the country's decision, soon after it became independent, to become the first state to voluntarily renounce nuclear weapons.

The persistence of high background radiation means the legacy of Semipalatinsk lives on. Academic researchers and pressure groups say the incidence of cancer, congenital defects, retarded development and psychiatric disorders in the surrounding are much higher than in other parts of Kazakhstan.

According to the cancer centre for East Kazakhstan Region, the disease occurs 10 to 15 per cent more frequently than the national average, with a high proportion of cases falling within the 50-60 year-old age bracket, in other words people who would have been around when nuclear testing was taking place.

Above-ground blasts ended in 1962, but underground testing continued for many years until the programme ended in 1989.

Some 1.7 million people are believed to have health problems caused by exposure to radiation.

These days, the radiation is at much lower levels. But experts warn that low doses and constant exposure can show up as genetic malformations. This is likely to persist until a complete clean-up is conducted over this vast area.

Aytkoja Bigaliev, director of the Ecology Institute at Kazakhstan's Al-Farabi University and a long-time researcher of the problem, says that the key task is to curb radiation in soil and water. Subsoil water carries away and distributes radioactive material left inside the now derelict underground shafts where explosions were carried out. In time, this material finds its way into the food chain and affects both animals and humans

Matters are made worse, said Bigaliev, by the fact that little action is taken to stop people pasturing their livestock, collecting salt and mining coal on polluted land. This results in radioactive substances being transported to other parts of Kazakhstan. He blames the problem on a mixture of popular ignorance and a lack of laws specifically outlawing such practices.

“Radiation levels on the polygon are 1,000 times the permissible amount,” he said. “They put their livestock out to pasture there without let or hindrance, and the meat and milk then ends up on people’s tables.”

Bakhyt Tumenova, director of the non-government pressure group on health matters called Aman Saulik, says one of the problems is that no one has really kept track of how people have been affected.

“It’s of pressing importance to determine the real impact of radiation,” she said. “Initially they determined the damage level by the simple principle of [looking at people] directly affected by radiation. But that’s inaccurate.”

Tumenov said that by contrast, Japan had used a “reconstructive” model which looked at the continuing effects of initial radiation and allowed a more accurate estimate of future problems.

As well as local residents, soldiers stationed near where the nuclear blasts took place in Soviet times say they are still living with the effects.

Back in 1962, Melgis Metov was a young conscript based four kilometres outside the testing zone or “polygon” as it is known here. His job was to prepare the monitoring equipment and take meter readings immediately after the blast.

In the year he spent there, 19 tests took place – 18 of them under ground and the other the even more dangerous type where the bomb was set off above ground.

“The polygon has cursed my life,” said Metov, who lives in Kazakstan’s second city and heads a committee of army veterans who served in “high risk units”.

He and the three other soldiers detailed for the job had only basic chemical-warfare kit – a gas mask and a protective cape.

Within a couple of months they were suffering splitting headaches and exhaustion, and discoloured spots appeared on their skin. On doctors’ orders, they were transferred to another role elsewhere, but Metov continued to have the headaches. By the time he was 30, he had a nervous tic and was losing his sight – he now has limited vision in only one eye.

He had to retire early, and says, “I might have achieved more than I did in life if the polygon hadn’t come my way.”

Metov’s commission has tried over many years to get the authorities to recognise the particular risks the nuclear troops underwent.

He pulls out a fat file of letters from various official institutions turning down the veterans’ request on the grounds that they are not eligible.

Kazakstan has a law dating from 1992 which sets out the benefits available to people who suffered as a result of nuclear testing. But strangely, it does not appear to cover soldiers who served in and around the test site.

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