Ukrainian capital Kiev engulfed in smog from wildfires near Chernobyl

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Since early April, wildfires have raged in the exclusion zone surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Although temporarily extinguished on Tuesday, April 14, they reignited by Wednesday.

The fires broke out on April 4 within just 1 km of the defunct Chernobyl nuclear power station, according to Greenpeace Russia. While Ukrainian authorities blamed the fires on a local 27-year old man, the reasons for the outbreak remain unclear.

The Chernobyl nuclear power station and the nearby town of Pripyat have been located in a 30 km exclusion zone since 1986 when Chernobyl's Reactor No. 4 exploded causing the worst nuclear accident in history, spewing over 50 tons of radioactive material into the atmosphere.

According to the *New York Times*, most of the radiation released by the 1986 disaster had settled into the soil. However, some was also absorbed by the roots of moss, trees and other vegetation in the surrounding area. The wildfires brought it to the surface, spreading radioactive particles in the smoke. Radiation readings close to the wildfires were elevated in the first half of April.

Initially, the wind carried the smoke mostly toward rural areas of Russia and Belarus. For the past week, however, smoke has also clouded the Ukrainian capital Kiev, home to 3 million people and located just 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Chernobyl. The smoke has become so thick that Kiev is now considered the city with the worst air pollution in the world, outstripping even cities like Shanghai.

While authorities have insisted that radiation levels in the capital were within the normal range, they urged residents to drink a lot of water, and stay indoors. They also advised the population to keep their windows shut and cover them with wet fabrics when opening them. The country is currently under lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, minimizing to some extent the exposure of the population to the smoke.

There have been 4,662 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 125 deaths in Ukraine.

There are many indications that authorities are downplaying the scale of the disaster. According to ABC News, 1,000 firefighters backed by aircraft have now been deployed to contain the fire, up from 450 a week ago. Firefighters have been forced to work 24-hour shifts within the Chernobyl contamination zone without radio-protective equipment. Photos circulating on Facebook showed exhausted firefighters sleeping on the ground without protective equipment. It was also reported that they were not even provided accurate maps of the exclusion area.

Throughout the ordeal, Ukrainian authorities have maintained they had the "situation under control" and that the fires had caused no increased risk of radiation to surrounding areas including the capital of Kiev which is located just 100 km (62 mi) from Chernobyl. On Monday, Volodymyr Demchuk, a senior official from Ukraine's emergency service stated that "There is no threat to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, waste fuel storage or other critical facilities."

However, on April 4, the Ukrainian government was caught deliberately lying about the scale of the fires claiming that they were a mere 20 hectares in size, while satellite imagery from Greenpeace showed the fire covered around 12,000 hectares. Other satellite images taken by NASA Worldview and confirmed by *Reuters* also proved fires had extended far into the exclusion zone.

Rashid Alimov of Greenpeace Russia also contradicted the government's claim that the fires posed no radiation risk by stating the fires could release

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radionuclides or atoms that emit radiation into the atmosphere. “A fire approaching a nuclear or hazardous radiation facility is always a risk,” Alimov said.

On April 5, just two days after the start of the fire, Yegor Firsov, head of Ukraine’s state ecological inspection service, posted on Facebook a video with a Geiger counter showing radiation levels at the fire 16 times above normal. According to Greenpeace, the fire spread to at least 20,000 hectares, the equivalent of 7 percent of the area.

The government’s brazen lies were further exposed by Chernobyl tour operator leader Yaroslav Yemelianenko who posted on Facebook that the fires were now only a kilometer from the station itself and around 2 kilometers from a site containing radioactive waste. He added that “The local authorities report that everything is under control, but in fact the fire is rapidly spreading across new areas.”

Yemelianenko also appealed to President Volodmyr Zelensky for help and suggested that Zelensky’s incompetence in dealing with the fires was a result either of the cabinet “not being told the real situation, or they’ve chosen the Soviet policy of hushing it up, as they did in ’86.”

The haphazard and self-serving response from the Zelensky government mirrors the behavior of both the capitalist and Stalinist regimes that have preceded him.

The scale of the disaster in 1986 continues to be deliberately downplayed and tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people affected by it have been left without adequate medical and financial support.

A 2006 United Nations report contends that the Chernobyl accident caused just 56 deaths, but the Ukrainian government continues to pay 35,000 pensions to spouses of victims of the disaster. However, the historian Kate Brown spoke to Ukrainian scientists who estimated that at least between 40,000 and 150,000 people died in Ukraine alone. The radioactive materials also spread widely into Belarus and Russia, contaminating tons of milk and other produce that were sold in the Soviet Union at the time.

The fact that firefighters are now forced to work around the clock shifts without radio-protective equipment is an indictment of both Zelensky and the previous capitalist regimes. It is well known that wildfires occur regularly in the area surrounding Chernobyl. Yet there was clearly no plan whatsoever to contain, let alone, prevent another outbreak of fires around the world’s most dangerous radioactive site.

While the initial explosion at Reactor No. 4 took place over 30 years ago, the sarcophagus that was constructed around it in the years immediately following the accident now faces “the high probability of collapse” and is scheduled to be dismantled by 2023. The sarcophagus itself was covered by a “New Safe Confinement structure” in 2016, which is essentially a shell that will surround the reactor while the sarcophagus is dismantled and the area is remediated. Scientists estimate that radiation remediation efforts will last until 2065. Ukrainian governments have turned much of the area immediately surrounding the site of the disaster into a tourist attraction.

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