

Amidst NATO-backed counteroffensive against Russia

Dam collapse in Ukraine causes major humanitarian and ecological disaster

Clara Weiss
6 June 2023

In the early hours of Tuesday local time, the Nova Kakhovka dam collapsed in Ukraine's southeastern Kherson region, which has been held by Russia since the spring of 2022. The collapse of the dam, which has been described as "strategically important," came amidst the early stages of Ukraine's NATO-backed "counteroffensive" against Russia.

While it is unclear what caused the dam to break, images from the scene appear to indicate that an explosion occurred.

The collapse of the dam and destruction of the adjacent Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant have created a humanitarian and ecological disaster of immense proportions.

Built in 1956 as part of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant, the dam is hundreds of metres wide, 30 meters tall and traverses Ukraine's Dnipro River. It held 18 cubic kilometers (4.3 cubic miles) of water, about the same volume as the Great Salt Lake in Utah. As of this writing, the rate and scale of water loss is not clear. Thousands of people have been evacuated, and dozens of settlements flooded. The provincial capital of Kherson, which had a pre-war population of about 290,000, is also threatened with flooding.

The Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant was also destroyed. It supplied a significant portion of the population in both Ukrainian- and Russian-held territories with drinking water, including the population of the Black Sea peninsula Crimea, which Russia has claimed since 2014. Their drinking water supplies are now threatened.

The plant also helped cool the six reactors at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe, which were placed in a cold shutdown in

September. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is monitoring the situation, the water supplies for the nuclear power plant in a cooling pond and the adjacent channels are still sufficient for "several months." The IAEA stated there is "no short-term risk to nuclear safety and security."

Scientists have warned that the dam collapse may be the biggest ecological disaster in Ukraine since the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

As a result of the damage of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant, at least 150 tons of engine oil were released into the Dnipro (or Dniepr) River, according to the Ukrainian government. Another 300 tons of engine oil could be released into the waters in the coming days, with incalculable ecological consequences not just for Ukraine but the entire region. The Dnipro River is one of the largest waterways of Europe.

Speaking to the German *Der Spiegel*, ecological scientist Oleksandra Shumilova said, "These oil products are not simply diluted and percolate away but are absorbed by living organisms such as vegetation and animals. In addition, oil forms a film on the surface of the water and over a large area, since the area is very shallow, and the water can therefore spread widely."

Moreover, Shumilova continued, the flooding of a large agricultural area means that "pollutants such as pesticides are washed out and into rivers and oceans." According to *Der Spiegel*, 98 percent of Ukraine's river basins flow into the Black Sea and the Azov Sea, with the remaining 2 percent flowing into the Baltic Sea.

The humanitarian and ecological disaster is hitting workers in Ukraine on top of a horrifying bloodbath on

the battlefield and an unmitigated social crisis of historic proportions. Recent figures released by a Ukrainian NGO indicate that 8.5 million people have left the country permanently since the beginning of the war, reducing its population to 29 million. Not all of them live in territories controlled by the NATO-backed Zelensky government. Of these 29 million, only between 9.1 and 9.5 million are gainfully employed, and about one-third of these rely on state salaries. Estimates put the number of Ukrainian deaths out of this small population at up to 200,000, with hundreds of thousands more wounded. It is a scale of mass slaughter and social misery unseen in Europe since World War II.

Russia and Ukraine have traded blame for the disaster, with both sides accusing each other of having deliberately blown up the dam. Some news reports indicate that the dam may have already been damaged through previous fighting last fall. According to CNN, satellite images indicated that the dam was damaged just days before the collapse.

There have also been conflicting reports about who might benefit from the disaster militarily on the battlefield. The *Wall Street Journal* noted that the flooding would “cut options” for Ukraine’s counter-offensive but also reported that the flooding could wash away fortifications and minefields put up by Russian forces in the area, possibly creating a military advantage for Ukraine’s counteroffensive.

The NATO powers and Ukraine have been quick to blame Russia for the disaster. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who has recently erupted in apoplectic rantings against Russia unheard of in Europe since the Nazi period, declared, “All things considered, one must naturally assume that this was an aggression perpetrated by the Russian side in order to stop Ukraine’s offensive aimed at liberating its own land.”

The US government was somewhat more guarded, with White House spokesman John Kirby stating that the US had not reached a final determination on who destroyed the dam. Kirby added, “We’re still trying to assess what happened here, but the Russians had illegally taken over that dam and the reservoir many months ago, and they were occupying it.” NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg denounced the dam’s destruction as “an outrageous act, which demonstrates once again the brutality of Russia’s war

in Ukraine.”

The truth is that the imperialist powers recklessly and deliberately provoked this war for decades, consciously taking the risk even of nuclear war, no matter the consequences for the population of Ukraine, Russia and the world. Since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO systematically expanded to Russia’s borders. A US-backed 2014 far-right coup in Kiev installed a government that spent the subsequent eight years transforming the Ukrainian army into a NATO proxy force and arming Ukrainian neo-Nazis to the teeth to prepare a war with Russia.

The Russian oligarchy, having emerged out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, was provoked into invading Ukraine, believing that by military means it could achieve some sort of compromise with the imperialist powers. All of the military and political calculations of the Putin regime have been motivated by this delusional belief in the possibility of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism, which it inherited from the Stalinist bureaucracy, and its profound fear of an international movement by the working class directed against capitalism.

Whatever the immediate causes of the dam’s collapse, workers must understand the unfolding humanitarian and ecological disaster above all as an urgent warning as to the immense dangers presented by the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine for workers across Europe and internationally. If a disaster of such proportions is unfolding barely 48 hours into the NATO-backed counteroffensive, what, workers must ask, will be next?



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)