



UKRAINE

Q&A: Ukrainian Official Says Russia Is Turning Nuclear Plant Into Military Base

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KYIV, UKRAINE — Russia is turning the occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant into a military base, according Petro Kotin, president of Ukraine's state-run nuclear company, Energoatom. The number of Russian military personnel at the nuclear plant now exceeds the number of personnel, he said.

The security personnel who recently worked at the plant told VOA that if a disaster at the station happened, it could not only contaminate half of Ukraine and the Black Sea but also gravely affect Europe as well.

Myroslava Gongadze, VOA's Eastern Europe bureau chief, discussed the situation with Kotin on Thursday in Kyiv. The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity:

Myroslava Gongadze, VOA Eastern Europe bureau chief: You were Zaporizhzhia nuclear station director for a long time, and you know the facility as well as anyone. Could you please give us an assessment of what is going on there today?

Petro Kotin, Energoatom president: The situation is worsening all the time, starting right from the beginning of the occupation, which was on March 4th last year when [Russian forces] ... captured the plant and installed their own regime, with soldiers making all the decisions about management on site. Our staff is still there. And then [Russian President Vladimir] Putin issued a decree creating a fake operational organization, which was based on Rosatom [Russia's state-owned nuclear energy monopoly], responsible for Russia's nuclear power plant operations. They pressured the personnel, our staff, to just sign the contracts with this fake Rosatom organization. There was torture, there was some beating of personnel. They also captured the staff and put them in cages. They had all types of torture in there. Some people were killed, and some people are missing. And we do not know where they are at the moment. And actually, this push on the personnel was always increasing during this time. And right now we know that about 2,000 to 2,700 of our staff signed this contract with [this fake organization], and we stopped our contracts with them. But still, in Enerhodar, [a town very close to the plant], we have about 6,500 people who are members of our staff. And so about 3,500 have not signed the contracts, and they are still pro-Ukrainian, and they are Ukrainian patriots. So we continue to pay them salaries, and Russians just prohibited them from coming to work.

VOA: They are not allowed work at the station?

Kotin: [Staff] are not allowed. [Russians] took all the security passes, and so [staff] are just staying in Enerhodar.

VOA: How much information do you have from the inside?

Kotin: From the plant, we have a lot of information, actually, and we got information about, like, you know, parameters of the plant and so on. And we also have information because this is our staff. So we can contact many of them just by phone, by messages, by different means. And also, if we are talking about the current situation, it is the deepest level of degradation of the plant that is actually possible.

VOA: How long do you think this situation can last amid this risk that something really bad can happen?

Kotin: If we are talking about time, this depends on how quickly [the plant] will be de-occupied. We always believed that [de-occupation could happen] in two weeks, up to one month, but this situation has already lasted for more than one year. And staff are just in constant hope that this is what finally will happen and just waiting and asking for help.

VOA: If we are talking about the worst-case scenario of what could happen with this nuclear station, what are we talking about?

Kotin: It is in the heads of these occupiers. They could be crazy or could be completely crazy; the level of craziness of these occupiers is different. We don't know what they want to do. And of course, there is a lot of nuclear material at the plant. There are six nuclear power units, six reactors full of fuel, and nuclear fuel. And also, there are six spent-fuel pools, each just beside the reactor, and they are also full of spent fuel assemblies. You can just damage these materials, and then you will have a radiation release. How much will it be? How much radioactivity would go out? It depends only on how much the fuel subassembly is damaged.

VOA: Still, if we are talking about the worst-case scenario, it would be contamination of Ukraine, contamination of part of Russia, Belarus, Europe? What are we talking about?

Kotin: As a possibility, again, you know, if you have damaged one fuel assembly, for example, this will be local contamination on site and maybe even in the buildings of the reactor. If you have damage in one reactor, this will be the scale of Chernobyl or the size of Fukushima. And then it will depend only on the weather conditions, where the wind will go and bring this contamination.

VOA: It looks like the International Atomic Energy Agency is very active in trying to facilitate the situation and talk to Russians. What are they bringing to the table, and can they be effective?

Kotin: To be honest, from the beginning we expected much more from IAEA, actually. Their involvement was helpful. Also, the involvement of [IAEA Director-General Rafael] Grossi was also very helpful in resolving some issues that were ongoing at the station. For example, the release of the acting general manager of the plant. He was released in three days, and I'm not sure if he would be alive right now if not for Grossi. Also, there are the observers always present at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant at the moment. Right now, there is a new rotation of these experts, and they got the information limited by armed members of the Russian military. But still they have information about the main parameters of the reactors: radiation, radiation data which are on site. So, the world, and our regulator, can get this information and compare it to what we had. So, we have an independent source of information on what is going on in there. What else? There is a longtime attempt to create a security zone around the nuclear power plant. This was an idea from Grossi, and it was supported by Ukraine, by Ukrainian authorities. The idea is just to establish a circle around the nuclear power plant area in which there shouldn't be any military, any military activities. And right now, there are some negotiations ongoing on that. But no decision yet.

VOA: But Russia already put some military equipment in the station, as was reported. So, it'd be difficult to force them to remove it — specifically in a situation when Ukraine is preparing for a counteroffensive.

Kotin: From the very beginning, [Russians] had a lot of ideas about how to use Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. And the original idea was just to take from Ukraine all nuclear power plants, to capture all nuclear power plants here in Ukraine.

VOA: So, it was a strategic plan to capture all Ukrainian nuclear stations?

Kotin: It was strategic from the very beginning. You know, they carried out all of this shelling of Ukraine's energy infrastructure during the winter just to make the country completely dark and completely cold without electricity. This was their plan originally. Our power production from the nuclear power plants is more than 55%, or around 55%. So if they would stop all nuclear power plants, capture and stop them, then they would accomplish their goal. That was their plan. They captured the Zaporizhzhia [plant], but they failed to capture South Ukraine [plant]. The plan was to capture both plants simultaneously. And it was a very serious offensive toward South Ukrainian Nuclear Power Plant. And they stopped there, like 3 kilometers [away], because there was a river, a natural obstacle there. So, we had nuclear except for Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and this actually provided [Ukraine] the opportunity to go through the winter period, which was very difficult. Then they started shelling the infrastructure. After that, they tried to reswitch Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to Crimea. It was their plan to [transmit] electricity from the Ukrainian system through Crimea to Russia, and that would be just to steal Zaporizhzhia [energy output] from the Ukrainian system and to retransmit all energy to Russia. And they also failed with that. And then they damaged all lines, actually, which connect Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant with the Ukrainian system. And this was part of their plan: You just damage the line which connects to Ukraine and then you just reconnect back. But all these lines were in the war zone. So, you cannot just, you know, just damage and then reconnect. And there were, actually, six blackouts at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant during this occupation. Blackouts, meaning no external power. And this is very dangerous for the plant. This is like the first stage of the event which happened at Fukushima. First, during the earthquake, they lost the external power. They were on diesel generators. And then, the tsunami from this earthquake 30 minutes later came, and all diesel generators sank and stopped working. And then they melted down. And in Zaporizhzhia we had six times this first event. Previously, before this occupation, it was 40 years of completely safe operation of the plant. Then [Russians] came in there. Right now, they only have one idea — to transfer it and to keep it like their military base because it is a protected area and nuclear material protects itself. So they understand that there won't be any shelling of the nuclear materials because of the risk, which will be this contamination.

VOA: So basically, the plant is a hostage.

Kotin: Like a hostage. Right. Exactly. And now, from the 1st of May, we've seen that there are more Russian military members coming to the plant and also living in Enerhodar, the satellite town nearby. They are all staying at the plant, constantly. And the number of Russian military people in there increased up to 2,500, whereas before it was about maybe 500 maybe on site.

VOA: So maybe they changed the strategy again?

Kotin: Yes, exactly. And right now the number of Russian troops there already outnumber the staff. So it is primarily troops, and they just increase personnel restrictions. At first, they actually restricted the use of mobile phones and smartphones, with the possibility of taking pictures. Now they've just restricted the use of all phones, which are forbidden at the plant. Personnel cannot have a telephone when on site. And also, this is the most incredible thing, I would say, is that [the Russian military] says you cannot move your head in some areas to catch a glimpse of what's going on. There are a lot of military preparations, fortifications, military vehicles and so on, on site. So you are only allowed to look straight ahead and not talk to anybody near you. Just go, do not move your head.

VOA: So, we have 6,000 people hostage and a nuclear power plant that could destroy half of Europe?

Kotin: Actually, if they want, they could do it. But there are also IAEA experts — one of the factors. The second factor is nuclear material. So, everybody should understand what would happen if somebody would try to do what you said. And there are also actual Rosatom personnel. They are supporting, of course, the Russian troops, but some of them are nuclear professionals, and they can understand the risks.

VOA: But there are a lot of questions, information and suspicions that Putin could use nuclear tactical weapons. So, for him, using the nuclear station as a weapon, it would not be as crazy an idea as the professionals think.

Kotin: I agree with you, actually. And this is the biggest concern we have about that, you know. And also, we know that they planted a lot of land mines on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant grounds. All the perimeter and passages within the plant and also, actually, passages to the plant and roads to the plant - everything is just land-mined by Russians. We understand that some time from now, we will finally get control of the plant and the Russians will be taken away from the plant. And then there will be a lot of work just to check everything and to restore the safety of the plant, and also this will be the work for our military - just to go and to remove all these land mines from the plant.