

the unheeded warning

Submarine blast liquidated seamen

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Bolshoi Kamen, Russia

EIGHT months before Chernobyl, an explosion on a nuclear submarine moored off Russia's Far East coast offered a grim foretaste of the disaster to come.

"The lid of the reactor, weighing several tonnes, flew hundreds of metres and the ten people working in the reactor compartment disappeared," wrote Rear Admiral Nikolai Mormul in a book on atomic submarine history. "They only found body parts in the bay a day later."

Joshua Handler of Greenpeace said naval sources had described it to him even more graphically. "They were wiped around the reactor room like butter, was how they put it. They had to bury the pieces in lead-lined caskets," he said.

Rear Admiral Mormul said a wall of secrecy was immediately thrown up around the 10 August, 1985, blast, muffling the bitter lesson it carried for the Chernobyl workers who caused their reactor's explosion through a strikingly similar human error.

The cover-up meant that compensation for those involved in the clean-up was out of the question. All they got were chits for new clothes which said they had been there when "the bang" happened, Admiral Mormul wrote.

Ten years later, the ruined submarine is still sitting in the bay at Chazma, one of three

which the Pacific Fleet says are in an "emergency state".

But safety seems low on the list of concerns of the people of Bolshoi Kamen, home to the Star nuclear submarine repair and decommissioning plant near the site of the explosion at Chazma Bay, on the Pacific coast opposite the port city of Vladivostok. The people in this town, where Star is the main employer, have more immediate worries.

"We don't get paid for months on end," said Pavel Vasilev, who said he had worked at the plant for 13 years. "We've only just got our money for November and December."

Vera Andreyevna, who supports working relatives from her 362,000 rouble (£47) monthly pension, said the worst thing was the power cuts, imposed partly because the plant cannot pay its bills.

Star, once part of an elite network of secretive defence plants, is surrounded by villages and abandoned military bases formerly known only by numbers.

Locals, who still pick mushrooms in the contaminated zone where the reactor exploded, are sanguine about the risk of another disaster, repeating the message from managers of the plant about strict checks and controls.

Valery Denilyan, head of the Pacific Fleet's chemical defence service, is more worried about the daily headache of dealing with 50 old submarines due to be scrapped by 2010 than the

risk of a new explosion. "In the last ten years nothing like that has happened ... but as long as you have nuclear submarines you can never say there will not be an accident," he said.

"There are a lot of problems here. There are no finances and then we've got the serious problem of the spent fuel. It is the most dangerous."

Mr Handler, who has written a detailed technical report on the environmental hazards of the Pacific Fleet, said there could be another big blast if a mistake was made in removing the fuel from an old submarine whose core life was not used up.

"Another Chazma is possible if some underpaid guys are not paying attention or someone is in a hurry," he said.

While there has not been an accident as bad as Chazma in the past decade, some hair-raising things have happened in the region.

In 1994, debris from shells and rockets fell on Bolshoi Kamen after an off-duty guard at a nearby arms depot set off an explosion by trying to dismantle an electrical component from a missile with a knife.

A year later, the workers at Bolshoi Kamen blocked a new generation nuclear submarine in the plant in protest at delays in pay.

They were persuaded to let it go and the workers now appear in no mood to repeat their action, clinging to the hope that if they continue to work they will eventually get paid. - Reuter

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