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Reporters allowed into 'secret city'

□ Tour of Russian nuclear research site underscores fears that scientists will take their skills elsewhere for more pay

ARZAMAS-16, Russia (AP) —



This city of 81,000 where Andrei Sakharov helped create the Soviet hydrogen bomb is surrounded by thick forests and appears on no map. There are virtually no telephone lines to the outside.

In 1946, it was designated a center for nuclear weapons research and sealed it off with barbed wire and guards.

Last month, Secretary of State James A. Baker III was denied permission to visit Arzamas-16.

But eight Western journalists, accompanying a group of Norwegians bringing in 33 tons of humanitarian aid, were allowed last week to pass the double rows of barbed wire and soldiers into the city 300 miles east of Moscow.

Townpeople surrounded the Westerners for autographs and handshakes.

"This is a historic moment," said Mayor Valery Takoyev. "You would not believe how difficult it was to arrange this visit."

But for all the hospitality, the

aura of secrecy remained.

The nuclear facilities were off-limits to the visitors, and city officials insisted the delegation stick to a strict program of sightseeing, meals and cultural events.

Photography was banned at most sites, prompting some to take pictures clandestinely. At one point on the bus, Norwegians sang loudly to mask the sound of their motor-driven cameras.

According to Mayor Takoyev, 25,000 people work at Arzamas-16's nuclear centers, including 2,000 to 3,000 scientists.

There are 10 secret atomic cities in Russia, and Western governments fear that scientists or nuclear materials from them might go astray, perhaps reaching terrorists or developing countries wanting to join the nuclear club.

One of the secret city's top scientists acknowledged the difficulties of trying to work in these economic hard times and said some of his colleagues might consider leaving Russia if the government cannot support their research.

"The first thing for a scientist is the possibility to realize his ideas and that is often closely connected to the conditions for fruitful work," said Alexander Pavlovskii, a senior researcher at the nuclear center.

But he and others in Arzamas-16 said Western worries about the nuclear experts leaving were exaggerated.

"We cannot exclude the possibility completely, but I don't

believe many scientists would like to leave the country," he said through an interpreter.

He said pay raises and research funding promised by Russian President Boris Yeltsin during a February visit to the city will not be enough because of inflation.

The nuclear scientists, whose average monthly wage is 1,400 rubles, or \$14, were promised a 700 percent pay increase by Yeltsin, city officials said.

The city offered privileges and perks to its residents under the Soviet system and still has a much higher standard of living than most of Russia. Nevertheless, life remains hard.

"The situation here in our town, as in all our country, is difficult. We are not saved by all these barriers around our town," said Pavlovskii, who was allowed to speak briefly to reporters.

Pavlovskii worked with Sakharov, who lived and worked in the city for 18 years in the days before he became a human rights champion.

Sakharov's rundown wooden house is now a city landmark.

Pavlovskii said the nuclear center will continue to develop weapons. Its main task, however, "is to make existing weapons more secure," he said.

Although Arzamas-16 remains closed to outsiders, residents may leave freely and relatives may visit once a year.

City Council Deputy Peter Huen said scientists are not allowed to leave the former Soviet Union for five years after leaving the city.

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