

# Nuclear waste released in Russia



MOSCOW (AP)

— Troops scooped up contaminated Siberian soil and snow today after a tank holding radioactive waste exploded in what the government called the worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

But Russian and foreign experts said Tuesday's explosion at the Tomsk-7 nuclear weapons complex posed little danger.

Workers were not evacuated from the plant, and only one fireman received a relatively high dose of radiation, said Georgy Kaurov, head of the Nuclear Energy Ministry's information department.

"It has been the single worst accident since the Chernobyl catastrophe," Kaurov said. "However, it cannot be compared to Chernobyl ... You simply can't compare them."

The uranium waste was released when an underground tank exploded and burned at Tomsk-7, a secret military city built in Siberia during the Soviet era. The Nuclear Energy Ministry blamed a rise in pressure in the tank caused when nitric acid was added as a cleanser.

The explosion tore off a concrete slab covering the tank and short-circuited the plant's electrical systems, which set off a fire.

The State Emergency Committee said radiation levels around Tomsk-7 were .03 roentgens per hour Wednesday. Northeast of the plant, levels were .04 roentgens.

The average acceptable dose

for nuclear workers is 2 roentgens per year, according to the International Commission on Radiological Protection. The initial radiation emission from Chernobyl was about 200 roentgens an hour.

A roentgen, named for X-ray discoverer Wilhelm Roentgen, is a measure of radiation.

The accident was one of a series in the former Soviet Union since a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine exploded in 1986, spewing radiation across Europe.

Monitoring stations in Scandinavia and western Europe reported no increased levels of radiation today.

"The radioactive spill (in Russia) is too limited and too small to measure," said Sven Carlsson, a spokesman for the Swedish Radiation Protection Institute.

Emergency experts flew to the site today. Nearly 500 civil defense troops were removing soil and snow from the area, officials said.

Local government leader Viktor Kress told the ITAR-Tass news agency that radiation had been detected in a strip of land about a half mile wide and five miles long leading from the city.

Tomsk-7 is believed to be about 12 miles outside Tomsk, a city of 500,000 people about 1,700 miles east of Moscow. Tomsk-7 does not appear on ordinary maps. There were no evacuations planned.

Kaurov said the explosion was considered a "third-class incident" on the seven-point Inter-

national Atomic Energy Agency scale.

The Chernobyl disaster rated seven. Officials said 31 people died at Chernobyl, but many Ukrainian and western experts say the figure is actually several thousand.

Kaurov said Tomsk-7 made weapons-grade plutonium until production was phased out three years ago. He said the complex now produces electricity and heats water.

In 1990, the Tomsk-7 complex was blamed for contaminating the Tom River with nuclear waste. At least 38 people were hospitalized.

A 1957 explosion at the secret Chelyabinsk-65 plutonium production complex in the Ural Mountains resulted in radiation contamination of 217 towns and villages. Nearly 11,000 people were evacuated, and local residents maintain that dozens of people died of cancer as a result.

During the Soviet era, secret cities were set up across Russia to work on military projects, including the Soviet nuclear weapons program.

Kaurov said only one of 25 firemen at Tomsk-7 received a dose of 0.6 roentgens. But Roland Finston, a health physicist at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., said in a telephone interview that it takes about 25 roentgens to cause a noticeable drop in white blood cells.

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