



EMBARGOED UNTIL: 1900 HRS GMT TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2006

NEW REPORT REVEALS RUSSIANS DYING FROM RADIATION SICKNESS AS ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION KEPT SECRET

Russians are being denied access to essential information about pollution, food contamination and nuclear waste and radiation, a new report published today (Tues 21 Nov, 1900 hrs) reveals.

The report, by *ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression*, shows that the Russian authority's secrecy over environmental issues is seriously endangering thousands of people's lives. Meanwhile, journalists and campaigners who have attempted to expose the risks to human health and the environment in Russia have themselves been persecuted by the authorities, often on the basis of secret decrees.

ARTICLE 19's 55-page report, *The Forbidden Zone. Access to Environmental Information in Russia*, demonstrates how numerous people in Russia presently live in areas near nuclear factories with high levels of radiations. Many of these have developed serious illnesses, yet they are systematically denied information about their true nature.

Health hazards caused by environmental issues in Russia include illnesses and poisoning from heavy metals and toxic materials - leading to a significant decline in life expectancy. According to statistics compiled by Russian scientist Alexei Yablokov, on average 300,000 people a year die in Russia due to unfavourable environmental conditions.

ARTICLE 19 Executive Director Agnes Callamard said:

"With some of the most polluted territory on earth, Russia's obsessive Soviet-style secrecy over environmental information is proving lethal to its people.

"It is utterly disgraceful that people in Russia get sick and die while the authorities deny them access to information on such issues as radiation pollution and industrial contamination".

"Russia needs to clean up its environmental act and to unlock access to the environmental information. This could literally mean the difference between life and death for some people."

A decade and a half since the collapse of the ultra-secretive Soviet Union, *The Forbidden Zone* shows how information on the environment is still shrouded in secrecy. After an initial wave of openness in the early 1990s, Russia has reverted to Soviet-style secrecy and employed methods to repress politically-sensitive information reminiscent of the former secret national intelligence service, the KGB.

The report reveals, for example, that :

- There is a general scarcity of information available on Russia's nuclear industry. This includes the area surrounding the Mayak facility in the Urals, which has been described as the most contaminated place on earth. In this area there have been three major nuclear accidents, resulting in high rates of cancer, birth defects and decreased life expectancy. Yet, the authorities have denied the existence of significant health and environmental concerns, and refused to disclose relevant data.
- Scientists like Aleksandr Nikitin and Nikolai Shchur have tried to expose the hazards posed by nuclear waste and radiation, yet have been labelled 'spies' and arrested and imprisoned.
- Scientist Igor Sutyagin is currently serving a 15-year hard labour sentence after being held in pre-trial detention for four years for allegedly selling secret nuclear and missile information to a British company (according to the authorities, a cover for the CIA). Mr Sutyagin had actually undertaken research and provided information on the basis of open sources.
- Several scientists have been sentenced under the notorious secret decree, Decree 055. The terms of this decree have been denied to defendants and their lawyers. Decree 055 has since been replaced by another decree, whose content (and even its codename) is completely unknown.
- Russia has some progressive provisions on access to environmental information, yet the authorities often fail to implement them, or do so selectively. Currently there are moves to amend legislation, further restricting access to environmental information.

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A copy of the report *The Forbidden Zone. Access to Environmental Information in Russia* is available at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/russia-the-forbidden-zone.pdf>

The Executive Summary of the report can be found at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/russia-the-forbidden-zone-exec-summ.pdf>