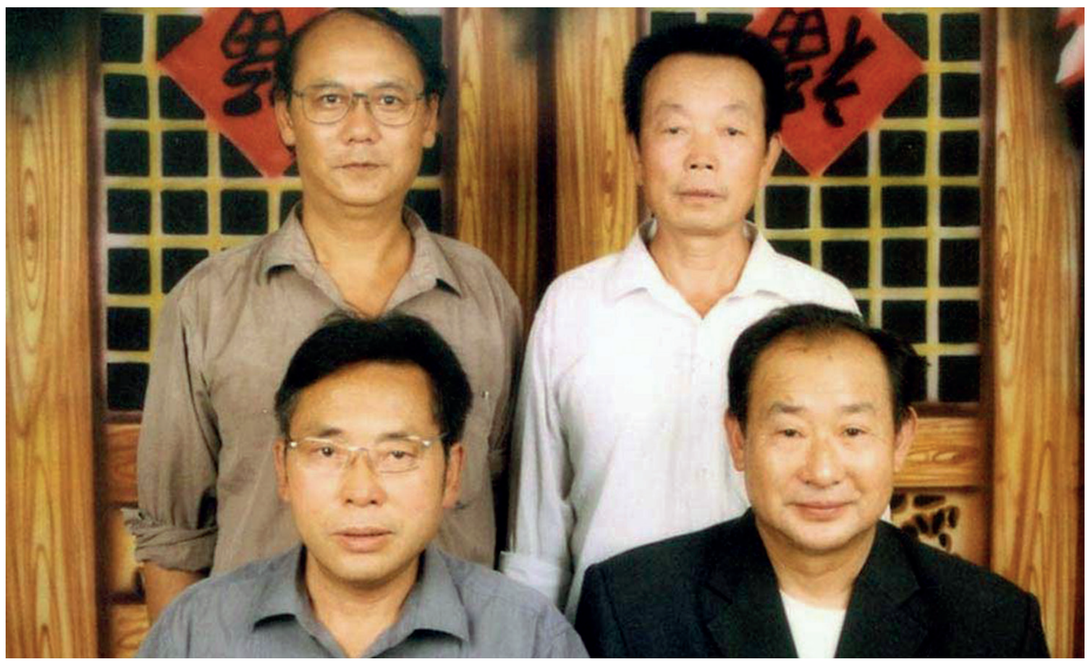
Têwo/Diébù, China

Uranium mining site

“Uranium Mine 792” at Diébù has been producing uranium for the Chinese nuclear industry and nuclear weapons program since 1967. Reports about radioactive contamination and a lack of safety measures, endangering the health of miners and the inhabitants of the region, have been ignored and subdued by the authorities.



Former workers of “Uranium Mine 792.” Whistleblower Sun Xiaodi can be seen on the upper left. He asked authorities to investigate cases of radioactive contamination – to no avail. In 2005, he spoke to foreign journalists and was arrested and sent to a labor camp for “reeducation through work.”

“Uranium Mine 792”: Due to state censorship, it is difficult to find out what is happening in the mining region. Refugees have reported severe health problems, unusually high numbers of miscarriages and birth defects, and more than 50 deaths due to mysterious illnesses between 1988 and 1991 in the vicinity of uranium mines, most likely caused by contaminated water.

China’s first experimental fast breeder at Tuloi (2004). China is the only country in the world which continues to invest heavily in nuclear power, even after the nuclear meltdowns of Fukushima and despite warnings by leading Chinese scientists that the country’s nuclear energy program is unsafe. Photo credit: Petr Pavlicek/IAEA

History

Located in the autonomous Tibetan county of Diébù, in Gansù Province, “Uranium Mine 792” was set up in 1967 by the Chinese military and is one of the country’s largest uranium mines. In its heyday, annual output was between 140 and 180 tons of uranium ore. Due to state censorship, it is difficult to know what exactly is happening in the mining region. The testimonies of whistleblowers are therefore the only independent sources of information. Since 1988, Sun Xiaodi, an employee of the mine, has repeatedly petitioned the authorities to look into grave cases of corruption and radioactive pollution in the region, but to no avail.

In 2005, he spoke to foreign journalists about the spread of radioactive dust by transports of raw uranium ore without proper safety measures. Furthermore, he reported illegal dumping of irradiated waste into the Bailong River, a source of drinking water for the region. Sun Xiaodi and his daughter were subsequently arrested and sentenced to “reeducation through work” in labor camps. In 2006, he was awarded the Nuclear Free Future Award for his brave activities, but was unable to attend the award ceremony due to house arrest.[1,2] In 2002, “Uranium Mine 792” was officially closed due to an alleged exhaustion of ore, but continues to be operated privately by Longjiang Nuclear Ltd, whose board consists of members of the provincial government and the Chinese Ministry for Nuclear Energy.[1,2,4]

Health and environmental effects

Because of state censorship, meaningful scientific research on the health and environmental effects of uranium mining in China does not exist. According to the “Harvard Human Rights Journal,” Tibetan refugees from the region have reported severe health problems, unusually high numbers of miscarriages and birth defects and more than 50 deaths due to mysterious illnesses between 1988 and 1991 in the vicinity of uranium mines, most likely caused by contaminated water. They also report deaths of domestic animals “whose organs appeared burnt” as well as severe damage to the region’s vegetation, and they describe the Bailong River, a tributary of the Yangtze, as “black and foul-smelling.”[1,3] Cases of large scale exposure to radioactivity due to uranium dust and contaminated water are well documented near other uranium mining centers around the world.

When “Uranium Mine 792” was privatized in 2002, former workers were replaced by temporary hired hands, making protests and health checks more difficult. According to Human Rights in China, the rotating migrant workers are often not aware of the health risks connected to uranium mining and are exposed to large amounts of radiation due to a lack of proper protection and careless behavior that includes eating and sleeping in the mines.[2] These workers are at risk for developing cancer, as studies from uranium mines in Germany and Canada have shown (see the corresponding posters in this exhibition). Sun Xiaodi also claims that contaminated mine equipment was sold all over China between 1994 and 2003, “with no precaution other than simple rinsing.” Factories using the heavy machinery from uranium mines would produce irradiated cement and concrete, further spreading radioactivity throughout the country.[2]

Outlook

Today, China is still investing in nuclear energy as a “clean” alternative to fossil fuel, even after the nuclear meltdowns of Fukushima and despite warnings by leading Chinese scientists that the country’s nuclear energy program “is seriously unprepared, especially on the safety front.”[5] The money made from uranium mining is pushing environmental and health concerns to the sidelines.

With whistleblowers like Sun Xiaodi under house arrest and uranium mines staffed with uneducated migrant workers, there is little hope of thorough investigations into the health status of miners and local residents. Doctors have repeatedly called for large-scale epidemiological studies of miners and the local population as well as independent assessments of the radioactive contamination of the Bailong river system. The people affected by radioactivity in Diébù are also Hibakusha, because their health is suffering due to the greed for cheap uranium for China’s civil and military nuclear programs.

References

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