

Radioactive past frustrates the big dig

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Anxieties over uranium radiation that stretch back to the communist state's negligent mining practices continue to frustrate commercial plans to guarantee the country's energy security and create a lucrative industry in supplying the world's nuclear power expansion.

Czechs' memories of their country's long tradition of mining uranium ore are very mixed. The element was actually discovered in what is now the Czech Republic in 1789 by chemist Martin Heinrich Klaproth when he analyzed mineral samples from the silver mines in Jáchymov, West Bohemia, while physicist and chemist Marie Curie is said to have proposed the name "radioactivity" after correctly interpreting the radioactive properties found within Czech uranium ore. During the 1950s, however, Russia controversially exploited the uranium mines of the former Czechoslovakia. Political prisoners were forced to extract the ore, which was then bought by Moscow for the cost of production. Now, the only operating uranium mine in the European Union, and the only one in Europe other than in Ukraine, is the Rožná mine run by state company Diamo, in Dolní Rožínka in the Moravian part of the Vysočina district.

During a trip to Vysočina to assess locals' feelings toward the revived plans of Australian uranium mining company Uran to safely capitalize on the uranium resources located near Přebyslav, CBW encountered villagers and town inhabitants who recalled how the communists allowed open trucks to transport ore from the mines to processing points. Uranium rocks that had dropped from the vehicles were sometimes found lying on pavements. "We don't want the uranium [business] here anymore, even if this time they will drive it away in enclosed trucks. They are promising money, but you don't sell your health for any money; there is enough cancer here already, people die young, before they reach 60," said one man among a group of pensioners gathered in the town square in Přebyslav.

"I don't want the mine here, I'm afraid for our health and for nature, mainly because of her," added another town resident, pointing down to his four year-old daughter. "The Vysočina locality [on the border between Bohemia and Moravia] still has its preserved nature, why destroy it? And if they really have to exploit the ore here, it should at least stay in the Czech Republic, it shouldn't go to Australia," he added.

World hungry for more

Given the soaring demand for uranium on international markets, analysts say it is hardly surprising that Uran is determined to overcome the opposition to its uranium mining proposal. "The uranium price was very low for years at about \$10 (Kč 170/€ 6.8) per pound. Then it jumped to \$135 in July 2007 before coming down to the \$80 per pound mark where it is hovering now," noted Viktor Goliáš, an expert on radioactive materials and uranium at the Institute of Geochemistry, Mineralogy and Mineral Resources of Charles University, Prague. The fact that world consumption of uranium is higher than production means the price is again expected to grow, he added, pointing out the array of new nuclear power plants that have been commissioned. "The swing to nuclear is global. The U.S. has re-evaluated its approach to atomic power, Russia is going to build more than 20 nuclear power plant blocks, China wants nuclear too, Finland is building a new reactor, Poland is discussing it," added Petr Novák, an analyst at brokerage **Atlantik finanční trhy**.

Uran had its first application to the Ministry of Environment (MŽP) for a uranium exploration license rejected last year due to objections by villagers, as well as on the grounds that the country's raw material policy does not support an expansion of uranium exploration and mining for objectives including nuclear power. As part of the lobbying campaign behind its second license application to the MŽP, Uran arranged a public meeting in a hall in Přebyslav that took place at the beginning of February. While dealing with locals' fears about the safety of modernized uranium mining and providing information about Uran's plans to pay fixed amounts into local government coffers in return for permits, Uran's managing director Kate Hobbs also went on to explain to journalists the great opportunity the uranium resource could give the Czech Republic. "I think there is an opportunity for the country to not only be self-sufficient in energy, but make itself a significant provider to other parts of Europe," she told news agency Interfax, adding that currently 40 percent of international demand for uranium has to be met from reprocessing, particularly of old nuclear warheads. "If the permits are not granted to us, I have no doubt whatsoever that other companies—and countries—will seek to acquire them," Hobbs said. „Given the country's

significant uranium sources ... I wouldn't be surprised if there were government-to-government approaches, and I'm not sure anyone in this country would favor seeing further Russian exploitation of uranium resources," she added.

The new license application has been lodged through daughter company Urania Mining, set up especially to pursue uranium mining projects around Polná, Věžnice, Brzkov and Jamné, near Přebyslav. Jakub Kašpar, a spokesman for the MŽP, said the ministry's officials are taking full account of the "disapproving attitude" of villages. "It is very important to us," he said. "It was the unambiguously negative attitude of the villages that was one of the reasons why we declined the application last year," he added.

Opposition on every street corner

Talking with people on a stroll around Polná, with a population of around 5,000, quickly showed the opposition remains

resolute in many quarters. Even kids in the candy shop knew about the case. "There have been leaflets out against it," said one 11 year-old girl, perhaps in reference to a petition against Uran's plans signed by more than 1,000 citizens of Polná.

Polná Mayor Jindřich Skočdopole said that last fall he declined an offer of a meeting from Uran. "I consider the matter closed, there's no space for negotiation," he added. The prospect of Uran bringing jobs is not even attractive, Skočdopole said, because there is almost no local unemployment. He also cautioned that the historical feel of the town could be destroyed by such commercial projects. "Yes, they offer money, but not everything should be sold for money. We gave the same 'no' to wind power plants. Nobody can convince me, I stand behind my people," he concluded.

Brzkov, with just 250 inhabitants, is about two kilometers from Polná. The argument that the village's beauty should be protected from mining operations may be undermined by the municipal office that is nothing but a gray socialist cube—within the building is a cinema hall where Uran recently met with citizens—but Brzkov Mayor Petr Pometlo is convinced locals' "stern resistance" to Uran will not crumble. "We simply don't want it here," he said.

Yet, as CBW took a picture of what with some exaggeration could be described as "poor children with dreary prospects" in front of the gray building, a man in a sport jacket stepped up to declare that he is "for the uranium." "I have downright positive regard for uranium," he said, adding that fresh employment opportunities would mean the local school would not have to close down. "I am the headmaster here," he announced before stepping onto a bus.

'Irrational fear' of radiation

"I think that apprehension about radioactivity [from these proposed activities] is irrational," uranium expert Goliáš summarized. "People don't realize it, but uranium is in everything. We actually need radioactivity in nature. Our body needs it," he said, adding that the Greens (SZ) antagonism to nuclear energy is their "sort of religion." "They do not support nuclear energy, but this is quite against their basic objectives. This is the only safe and ecological source of electrical energy on a large scale without the production of carbon dioxide."

His sentiments meet with plenty of agreement in Dolní Rožínka, the location of the Rožná mine. "It is absolutely safe, we're not afraid of radiation," declared one man in a pub, while another pub goer offered another assurance. "Our kids are as hard as nails and we have plenty of them."

The mine opened in 1957, then employing some 4,000 people compared to today's 1,000. Before 1989, Czechoslovakia was the fifth-biggest producer of uranium, after the U.S., Canada, Germany and South Africa. Uran has shown interest in being part of a joint venture at the mine, run by Diamo subsidiary GEAM Dolní Rožínka, but all its approaches have been rebuffed. "They came with an offer of poor distinction in which we saw no advantages for the Czech side but only for them," said Zbyšek Sochor, director of the Department of Mining of the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MPO). "They offered an improvement in the quality of mining processes that actually meant they were indoctrinating us about extraction methods which we have known about for 40 years. We are not a banana republic here," he added.

Despite shutting down uranium mines from 1990 because of extremely low market prices, the government made an exception for the Rožná site fearing that closure would cause extreme unemployment in the area, Sochor added. Now, with uranium prices having surged by eight times, the situation is quite different. Břetislav Sedláček, who on the firm's Web site is listed as "entrusted with managing" GEAM Dolní Rožínka, said the company intended to mine within existing limits until 2011 but might then follow up on the results of deeper level exploration. "Given the price of uranium we can now mine even deposits that were uneconomical before. So we explored under [1,200 meters]," he added.

Investment at deeper levels?

There is some conjecture that foreign investors could be allowed to invest in these deeper mining levels. "Investment into opening a new level is about Kč 1 billion. But if we find out the mineralization [of the uranium] below 1,200 meters is such that it is economical to go there, we will be happy to make such an investment. We would rather do it ourselves than with someone else," Sochor said.

Uran is trying to deal with Diamo on every possibility of mining and has said it is interested in mining in Stráž pod Ralskem. Diamo, on the other hand, says that current talks have been limited. Marian Böhm, Diamo's deputy director for production related to potential uranium exploration in Stráž pod Ralskem, North Bohemia, insisted that all his current dealings with Uran are only in regard to Uran possibly identifying residual uranium in dumps near Příbram, Central Bohemia.

Uran has said it would use underground mining in Stráž pod Ralskem rather than chemical mining, something which once devastated nature and tainted water supplies with sulphuric acid in North Bohemia.

If the Czech government eventually bows to the lobby to link the country's growing electricity needs to a nuclear power expansion, Uran and possibly other uranium enterprises might redouble their efforts aimed at achieving a change in the Czech raw material policy. Sochor, however, said that whatever headway is made with ministers, the company will not be able to discount local feelings. "The only chance a company interested in such mining has is to convince locals. They must get them on their side," he concluded. Villagers, it seems, can expect more uranium friendly videos at their cinema halls some time soon.

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