

North Korean Defectors Say Radiation Is Leaking From Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site



Photo: AP

North Korea's infamous nuclear test site, a facility in Punggye-ri in Kilju County, has long been reported to maintain the standards one might expect for a pariah government low on everything but zeal and weaponry. Outsiders can only get a limited picture of the country, let alone the test site, thanks to its isolation from the rest of the world. But concerns have included tunnel collapses at the facility and the possibility Mount Mantap, where it is located, could implode under stress from repeated nuclear tests and release large amounts of radiation.

Per NBC News, some defectors say that radiation emanating from the Punggye-ri test site could be the cause of "ghost disease" ravaging the area, causing sicknesses like leukemia and birth deformities. Some 30 people who lived in the region are being tested by the South Korean government for signs of radiation poisoning, but so far authorities haven't publicly released any information indicating the claims are true.

"We thought we were dying because we were poor and we ate badly," defector

Lee Jeong Hwa, who fled North Korea in 2013, told NBC News. “Now we know it was the radiation.”



Punggye-ri. Photo: AP

As NBC noted, North Korea has only been testing nuclear weapons since 2006, when the country successfully detonated a bomb that registered 4.2 magnitude on the Richter scale. Tales of “trout dying in the mountain streams and the area’s prized pine mushrooms disappearing” began long before then, some as early as the 1980s, suggesting other military activities could be responsible for contaminating the county with some form of toxin.

James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies scientist Ferenc Dalnoki-Veress told NBC that neighboring governments maintain equipment to detect the release of radiation, and that nothing particularly abnormal has shown up. He said that one incident in which authorities detected a small amount of xenon gas, a radionuclide, five days after the alleged test of a hydrogen bomb in September was “very, very unlikely” to have arisen from a detonation or leak from Punggye-ri; Dalnoki-Veress also ruled out groundwater contamination from the testing, saying it could have leaked via steam vents.

Previous analysis by AccuWeather has concluded North Korean nuclear tests tend to be held when wind conditions are light, which could keep radioactive material from being dispersed outside its borders. At other times, regional newspapers have reported accounts of soldiers being treated for exposure following detonations. Chinese nuclear expert Wei Shijie told the *Telegraph* some kind of accident was probably “inevitable,” and “It is just a matter of time to detect it, because there are cracks on mountains where radioactive substances will leak.”

[NBC News]

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