Watching the

It’s difficult to know where to start with this story. Often the best place to begin anything is with a fact, though it’s fair to say that there are very few unimpeachable facts to be found here. So, instead of starting with a fact, let’s simply start at the beginning.

On the 27th (or maybe 26th…) of July, 2012, at the Pochel 2 military demilitarisation facility in Pochep, Bryansk, Russia, there was a spill of ‘VX’ – an oddity in this story is that all the media, News etc. claim that the substance was VX (a Nato nomenclature), rather than the expected Substance 33 (or R-33). The spill was not made public until the 31st July. If there is a little haziness about whether any of the above is fact, the next bit is where the divergence between truth and conjecture really gathers pace.

Life News and News.RU led with the fact that there had been six tons of agent released, though sometimes in the same story, depending on who they were speaking to, this became 40-50 kilogrammes or pounds (lbs). Early versions of the story (and thanks to the wonders of the internet the factual iridescence of this story continues to shift) suggested that the facility had soon become overwhelmed, “Here we need scientists, but they do not work for me at the factory,” they quoted Lt. Col. Kosarev, and that the clean up crews had been overwhelmed by the scale of the spill. Despite statements saying that none, or one, or even two, had been hurt (or hospitalised), it appeared that the clean up crews were sent in without suits and with negative pressure respirators (as opposed to SCBA/PAPR) and required filter cartridge changes every twenty minutes. This general picture then changed to standard respirators, L-1 lightweight suits and a revolving workforce of (maybe) military personnel. A worker was quoted as saying: “There was a technical safety breach. Maybe this accident did not threaten the local population, but when we were cleaning up the aftermath, they continued to use normal people. That has a negative effect on their health.”

Anyone with an ounce of CWA knowledge will start to wonder about this story. A significant amount of VX will have an emotional impact on the surrounding countryside. The garrison village is only five kilometres from the site, and the weather on the 27th (and 26th) was a hot 30oC with a light NNW breeze, which (using both Wiser and Aloha) would have spread a significant health hazard to the surrounding area. Anyone opting not to use dermal protection would have had a very bad day and even the L-1 suits might have proved inadequate at the leak site. Notwithstanding the fine detail, this story can be boiled down to three possibilities: first, it wasn’t VX, the decon procedure had already started and it had been pushed into something less toxic; second, it was VX, but it wasn’t as large a spill as suggested; and third, it was VX, it was a large spill, and there are far more people killed and wounded than we currently know of.

To put you out of your misery, and to insert what appears to be the closest thing to a fact, it is the second possibility, i.e., there was a spill of VX, but it was not as large as suggested. The reason we ‘know’ this? Five OPCW inspectors were based there. The Life News article first suggested this possibility, with a quote from Kosarev saying the inspectors turned up two days after the spill and couldn’t find a trace of the release. Mike Luhan, OPCW Spokesman and Head of Media and Public Affairs, confirmed this: “Our inspectors were on-site at the time and submitted a detailed report on the incident. Without going into details of the report, we can describe it as a minor incident that was quickly contained and caused no health and safety concerns for our inspection team. The leakage/spill occurred within the toxic area and was handled in a very professional and efficient manner by site personnel.”

Denial always sets off the journalistic bells, especially when related to the country that delights in the kind of “CBRN? Nothing to See Here!” stance of Chernobyl and Sverdlovsk. It appeared that Russian officials would like us to believe that this is yet another incident in which there is nothing to see. Digging around in Russia during the summer is a fruitless task, with people either in their dacha or pretending to be in their dacha and not answering questions. Yet the good people at Green Cross, specifically Dr Paul F. Walker, Director, Environmental Security and Sustainability were around. Dr Walker was able to provide corroboration on the spill, and confirmed OPCW statements that it involved a small spill that was quickly dealt with. “The accident occurred at Pochep in the Bryansk Oblast.” he said. “This stockpile holds 7,500 metric tons (officially 7,498.158 MTs) of nerve agents in large aerial bombs and spray tanks. Russia has reported that, as of March 12th, 2012, it had destroyed 10,144 munitions (15.1%) of 67,079 munitions declared at Pochep; it has destroyed 2,263 metric tons of agent (30.2%) of 7,498 MTs declared at Pochep. These figures include 6,587 spray tanks destroyed (of 6,587 declared), 3,557 500kg aerial bombs (of 13,165 declared) and no 150kg bombs. The Pochep facility started destruction operations in November, 2010, although its original opening
date was projected for early 2008, almost three years earlier. News reports indicate that a number of facility workers may have been injured by the spill, though informed sources tell me that the accident was a ‘minor spill’. There is no public information on the status of the Russian workers, nor any accurate information on how much agent and/or neutralised agent was actually spilled.”

Coincidentally, GB vapour was detected at the Blue Grass facility in Kentucky, US, on August 6th. This story made the US papers in all the required detail. None were hurt, largely because the detection was done during the weekly headwall monitoring and the cause was the perennially leaking M55 rockets. Compare this with the Russian event, where there was a confused, changing picture and the best source is the OPCW, which has made a report of the leak but this is confidential and only released with the approval of the state party, which is unlikely to be given. This all begs the questions: how often does this happen in Russia, is this only a story because it happened in the quiet summer months, and does it pose larger questions? There were five days between the spill and the announcement of it, so on-site inspectors clearly felt no need to make an announcement, to encourage Russian officials to do the same, or to reassure the population. The question has to be if a CBRN vessel leaks, and there is ‘no-one’ around to see it, does it actually leak?

There is a certain amount of inevitable reticence involved when criticising Russia, which has been equally critical of the funding drying up from the international community, and that as long the process continues in the right direction then there is nothing to complain about. Currently there have been no (attributable) deaths due to a release in either the US or Russian programs, which is clearly a safety record to be proud of. Also, the OPCW has been quiet on accountability in Russia and much of this is down to a need to keep the State Party calm (and similar quietude was seen in the case of South Korea and India). This encourages a belief that everything is broadly ok. It is analogous to the owner of a car that is petrified of it breaking down and thinks: as long as the vehicle is going in the right direction then the speed and the weird sounds it makes are less important.

This recent spill can be seen as one of the weird rattles emitted by the demil vehicle – the true causes of which may not always be obvious to the driver, but everything still seems to be fine. Recently there has been a disastrous decline in international interest in chemical demil and this has been accelerated by the economic downturn. Germany continues to fund programs; indeed, Pochep is one of their projects, but the US, Canada and the UK are scaling back funding, especially in Russian CW destruction (the UK, for example, has withdrawn funding for the annual demil conference). Green Cross had been an additional brake on poor safety and security, and provided greater international visibility, yet their dozen or so local and regional offices, in places such as Pochep, have been shut down after Global Partnership funding was withdrawn. It is not just a shortage of funding that has been the problem: Green Cross offices, in places such as Shchuch’ye, Kurgan and Chelyabinsk were closed down by Russian pressure, which the US Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program acquiesced with. I don’t have an axe to grind with Green Cross, after all agencies can fall in and out of favour/funding for good reason as much as bad. But it is disappointing that CTR chose not to improve the situation with a similar, international agency.

This recent news story has been sensationalist, of that there is little doubt, do I feel, however, that this is not symptomatic of what would be seen if there had been a significant spill – a dry run (if you’ll pardon the pun)? All the elements are coalescing: Russian obscurantism seems to be increasing at a rate directly proportional to the drying up of international funding and the age of their munitions; the OPCW’s job is not to criticise but get the job done; and international organisations, such as Green Cross (that could provide independent verification or criticism) are being shut down. When we compare the level of information and concern over the Kentucky spill with that of Bryansk, the two seem very disparate. The US response filled the international community with confidence that should the same, or larger, incident happen again it would not be a threat to locals and regional neighbours. My concern is that as the international community loses interest – which has been a Russian complaint for years and is now more justified than ever – then Russia’s safety record will fall hostage to their continuing elimination program (‘Just get rid of them!’). With the facility in Kizner still to be operational, Russia meeting their deadline of 31/12/15 looks optimistic, and many are expecting the schedule to be extended by two to three years. Here’s hoping that none of those ‘rattles’ result in something serious while we are looking the other way…

*Additional Reporting from Howard Gethin in Moscow