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Nuclear Debris Lands on Chile?

From: magnus@io.com (Bruce Lanier Wright)
Date: Sat, 14 Dec 1996 09:45:26 -0600
Fwd Date: Sat, 14 Dec 1996 23:33:54 -0500
Subject: Nuclear Debris Lands on Chile?

Media Ignores Real Fate of Failed
Russian Probe?
by Kristi Coale and James Glave

A nuclear cloud hangs over the failed Russian Mars space probe, and most of the US media is looking the other way. That's the assessment of nuclear activists and watchdogs familiar with the true details of Mars 96's fiery re-entry and breakup into Earth's atmosphere.

The craft was originally reported to have fallen harmlessly into the South Pacific near Australia. However, the probe, powered with a half-pound of highly radioactive Plutonium 238 pellets, broke up in the atmosphere over South America on 16 November and rained down on Chile and southern Bolivia, according to a 4 December report in the Boston Globe.

The Globe story said the US Space Command waited until 27 November to reveal that its original predictions of an ocean landing had been wrong and that "pieces of it may have hit Chile or Bolivia."

Plutonium 238 has a shorter half-life and generates a good deal more radioactivity than standard weapons-grade Plutonium 239.

"You have this shit drop as it did, who knows where the hell it spread," said Karl Grossman, a professor of journalism at the State University of New York and expert on space journalism. "It's going to be around for a couple thousand years. That's a significant problem."

Grossman characterized the failure of The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and The New York Times to follow up on the story and report the actual crash area as absolutely disgraceful.

"What we have here is space boosterism," he said.

"US Space Command wanted to get this off the front pages, so they sat on [the news of the actual crash site] for 11 days," said Bruce Gagnon, state coordinator of the Florida Coalition for Peace and Justice, an activist group fighting to keep plutonium out of space.

"Now, everyone's talking about the hatch that's stuck on the space shuttle," Gagnon said.

Gagnon believes that NASA and the US Space Command wanted to downplay the story to keep concerns about launching plutonium into space at a minimum. Next October, NASA will launch the Cassini Probe to explore Saturn. That spacecraft will carry 73 pounds of Plutonium 238.

Had word of the terrestrial crash leaked out when the Mars probe was still page one news, eyes would have turned to Cassini and perhaps placed the project in jeopardy, Gagnon said. By sitting on the news, the government keeps the flow of information on plutonium in space in small pieces that are easily digested by the press, lulling them into a state of complicity over space developments, he said.

"NASA feeds the information to the reporters a little at a time, and they get used to the idea. We're now used to the idea that we use plutonium in satellites," said Gagnon.

Gagnon said plutonium isn't the only answer; it's what NASA and the Department of Energy, which oversees certain aspects of the space missions, advance while downplaying other sources. For example, solar power is a possible source for propellants for satellites. Although NASA has issued reports that find solar power inadequate for deep space satellites such as Cassini, the press has failed to dig deeper, said Gagnon.

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