

Fear, not radiation, the sad legacy of Chernobyl



VIENNA - Chernobyl was the site of the worst nuclear accident in history. But nearly two decades on, poverty and a crippling fatalism—not radiation—are what truly afflicts the people of the region, concludes a groundbreaking report compiled by UN experts.

The Chernobyl Forum report estimates that some 4,000 people could eventually die from radiation exposure caused by the 1986 accident in the then-Soviet Union, far fewer than previously assumed. To date only 56 deaths have been directly attributed

to the disaster.

"The health and environmental effects...have been relatively, and surprisingly, minor," said Kalman Mizsei, UN Assistant Secretary-General and UNDP Regional Director for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

But Mr. Mizsei said that a lack of information and a Soviet legacy of fatalism have left Chernobyl survivors convinced that they continue to live under a cloud, resulting in a culture of despair and dependency that has stunted development in the impoverished region.

"Research shows that people still don't know what the effects are," he said at a press briefing ahead of the Chernobyl Forum conference in Vienna. "The fatalistic mentality that communism created has shifted to Chernobyl."

The Chernobyl Forum is comprised of eight UN agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as representatives from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, the three countries most affected by the accident.

The Forum's concluding report, "Chernobyl's Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts," is being presented at the conference, which begins 6 September. The three-volume, 600-page report represents the work of hundreds of scientists, economists and health experts and provides a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the disaster.

The experts concluded that the majority of people who had been living in the contaminated area received only low doses of radiation. There is no evidence of decreased fertility, or of an increase in birth defects. There have been 4,000 cases of thyroid cancer caused by the blast, mainly in children, but except for nine fatalities, all of them have recovered.

Moreover, the accident has been far less damaging to the environment than originally feared. Except for the still closed, highly contaminated 30-kilometre area surrounding the reactor, and a few lakes and restricted forests, radiation levels have mostly returned to acceptable levels.

While the report makes clear that Chernobyl was a "very serious accident with major health consequences," it also found that "the mental health impact of Chernobyl is the largest public health problem unleashed by the accident to date".

Misinformation has led many Chernobyl survivors to believe that they are doomed to die from the radiation. Ironically such fatalism has caused many to disregard their health, exacerbating existing problems such as poor diet, excessive drinking and tobacco use.

"Fear is not allowing [these people] to get on with their lives," said Burton Bennett, chairman of the Chernobyl Forum and an authority on radiation effects.

The real problem of the Chernobyl area, as for much of the former Soviet Union, is poverty, said Mr. Mizsei, but misperceptions have helped to keep moneys from being used effectively for development.

Belarus spent a whopping 22% of its budget on Chernobyl outlays in 1991, and currently sets aside 6%. Ukraine devotes some 5%-7% of its national budget to Chernobyl.

The UNDP has identified the need for better information, a more targeted and equitable system of benefits and

investment-friendly policies to end what Mr. Mizsei called a “backward-looking, fatalistic dependency culture”.

Mr. Mizsei said that the report’s largely positive findings about the health and environmental impact of Chernobyl will help governments and Chernobyl residents to move on from the disaster and focus on the future.

“This conference is about putting to rest the science and facts about Chernobyl, and looking forward,” he said. “Science is on the side of hope, not gloom.”

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The Forum’s conclusions are presented in the digest report, “Chernobyl’s Legacy: Health, Environmental and Socio-Economic Impacts,” which can be downloaded here:
http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/Chernobyl/pdfs/05-28601_Chernobyl.pdf

For additional information on the Chernobyl Forum, see: <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Focus/Chernobyl>

To view the UN report “The Human Impact of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery,” see: <http://www.undp.org/dpa/publications/chernobyl.pdf>

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