

Address by Adi Roche, Executive Director of the Chernobyl Children's Project, at United Nations General Assembly, New York at event organised to mark the 18th Anniversary of the Chernobyl Disaster

It's my great privilege, on this the 18th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident that is Chernobyl, to address such a distinguished gathering, here in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations.

I speak to you on this special occasion to recall a tragedy, part of which you have just witnessed in this short but very powerful documentary filmed by Ms Maryann De Leo, with assistance from the Chernobyl Children's Project, the Irish aid organisation to the victims of Chernobyl.

Maryann told me that when she asked Mr Penderecki for permission to use part of his 3rd symphony as the background closing music to the documentary 'Chernobyl Heart', he said that permission would be granted only if the film offered hope. Well, maybe here this evening in this sacred chamber where matters of life and death are regularly discussed, we have before us matters of life and death, and hope, and despair.

Can we offer these innocent victims hope? I mean, realistic hope, not just kind platitudes but real hope, hope that translates into positive action; that will renew their tired and battered spirits; give hope to countless parents that watch their precious children suffer so needlessly; offer hope to struggle on into a dubious future; hope to conceive and bear healthy children; hope to believe that their struggle is not ignored, hope to believe that they are not on their own. Can we offer them hope to hope?

Well, there is real hope, real progress, as on this very day, due to collaboration between two US NGOs and Ireland, a large group of American surgeons travel to Belarus for their 1st medical mission. These surgeons are not only saving lives, but are bringing lasting change through education and training local physicians. Good news always brings hope and I'm sure you too will be delighted with this good news regarding some of those children in the documentary.

Sasha, the boy with the problems on his hands and feet was brought to Ireland immediately after we filmed him. He received treatment that cured him and now returns to his Irish 'mama and papa' twice a year; Juliya, the little girl with the separate brain is still alive; Yvgenie has had the appalling tumour on his back removed and has survived; our Chernobyl Heart girl, Tanya, is also doing very well! Isn't that great news and certainly shows what can be done. Our chest of hope is filling up again!

However we cannot and must not become complacent. Tonight we are invited to use this anniversary to re-dedicate our efforts to alleviate in whatever way we can, the suffering of the victims of Chernobyl and to pledge that we will not give up on the innocent victims of Chernobyl, either in the Ukraine, Western Russia or in Belarus; that we pledge again that their struggle is our struggle, that their plight and suffering is our plight and suffering and that their journey into a very frightening and unknown future will be our journey too.

When we view 'Chernobyl Heart', we are reminded of the reality of the Chernobyl tragedy; what scenes that can touch and indeed, almost break **our hearts**. Yet this short film can only suggest the enormity and scale of the tragedy that is Chernobyl today; this film offers mere

picture postcards of a much greater and widespread daily struggle that so many people have to deal with. The film, shot only in a few vital locations, can only hint at the much more extensive landscape that is the legacy of Chernobyl.

We pledge this evening to sustain every country's treasure - it's children! Children are our very special investment in the future; they are the nation's bequest to future generations; to deny them a future is a form of genocide. What greater arrogance is there than to deny any child a future? But we must insist and demand that the future for Chernobyl children is one where their health is not blighted with the deadly invasion of nuclear contamination. A future where the unnatural fear of bearing more children will recede as new life is supported and maintained. A new future where the anguish of brokenness; both physical and psychological, will be healed and comforted, and with assistance from kind men and women around the world, and indeed, from other children, who will reach out and show huge love, healing love, for there but for the grace of God, go you or I.

In so doing we are sharing the burden, we are breaking the isolation, we are reaching out and 'doing something'. I emphasise the 'doing something' because fine words will never feed a hungry child or heal a broken body. The action of the 'doing' translates all the positive inner energy into that needle and syringe, into that food, that medicine, into these gatherings, that can, and do really save the world!

In the affected areas of Chernobyl they say that children live their lives very quickly. The survivors are facing a demographic disaster where science cannot yet completely assess the consequences. Dr Vladislav Ostapenko, Head of Belarus' Radiation Medicine Institute, reports: "we are now seeing genetic changes, especially among those who were less than 6 years of age when the accident happened. These people are now starting to have families so we are witnessing the effects of the disaster move to the next generation."

What we are witnessing is the slow erosion of a nation's health. Scientific research carried out shows that the people are faced with soaring levels of infertility and genetic changes, affecting the very future of their race. Their mortality rates already outstrip their birth rates. According to the UN, 7 million people are affected, half of which are children. In Belarus alone, 90% of children are deemed victims of Chernobyl. Because of severe damage to the immune system there is deep concern for the body's inability to fight cancer cells. Already Belarus has seen such soaring levels of thyroid cancer that it is considered to be in epidemic proportions. In babies between nought and three exposed in the highest fallout areas, up to 25% can be expected to develop thyroid cancer. One in four or five, instead of one in a million. According to leading thyroid expert, Dr Demidhick (Thyroid Tumour Centre, Minsk), thyroid cancer has increased by 2,400%. He says: 'It is like as if our children have been attacked by radioactive iodine 131.'

These figures and statistics can only numerate the results of this catastrophic event in Chernobyl on April 26 1986. But scenes from the film that we have just seen, reminds us all very specifically that it is this girl Juliya, that boy Sasha, that mother, this father, who suffers and whose whole life is blighted by this awful living, and constant nightmare - a burden that no one should have to bear alone.

We are gathered here, in the United Nations, gathered here under the flags of every nation on this good earth that God gave us where we pledge to serve and satisfy each and everyone's legitimate claim as citizens of the world with all its inherent values and claims and

responsibilities and particularly to that sense of hope – no, that demand of *hope* - to that hope that under-pins and copper-fastens the United Nations Charter particularly, that Convention that protects and promotes the rights and claims of all children .

And so today, we testify and say, we can honour their struggle, say to them with a loud voice and with a clear conscience that their struggle has not been in vain; that they are not forgotten; that they are truly our brothers and sisters; that their suffering is our suffering and that we will continue to lend a helping hand; to hold up that light, that torch of hope, that will shine into their darkness and despair and lead them out of their pain.

Just over a month ago to this day, I watched the flame of this year's Olympic torch being lit on Mount Hera in Greece. I watched that runner proudly carrying that special flame head off into the distance, proclaiming a sign of joy and unity, inviting the world to cease their wars and strifes, to come together in human fellowship and participation. Watching that lovely and ancient ceremony gave me a real warm experience of sharing in this common humanity, an experience that is with me right now. It is as if we are here gathered tonight to light another torch, another flame, another beacon. This evening let us light a beacon of hope for the victims of Chernobyl.

Watching that Olympic torch being lit also reminded me of that wonderful story that when Pandora unlocked her box and left fly all those tragedies and vanities, she at least, managed to contain that most precious and enabling quality of – that of hope. The famous French writer, Victor Hugo once said that the word which God has written on the brow of every man is hope.

And so, gathered here we re-light this beacon of hope tonight here in the heart of hope, the UN Now let its light flash around this world of ours - but especially let it fly to the dear people and land of Belarus, dear Ukraine, dear Russia to say to you: "Look, the flame is not quenched, the beacon is still alight. Gather near and gather strength from its light and warmth. You are not forgotten. You are not alone, you are among friends and neighbours who care and who want to share in your plight and despair. Not with just fine words but with positive and life-changing initiatives of action. Putting our money where our mouths are – indeed where our hearts are.

An example of this is where we have drawn financial aid from the Irish Government and the corporate sector from, Pfizer International, together with ourselves into a partnership recognising the need to shift from emergency relief to sustainable redevelopment and empowerment-based projects.

Projects which empower local communities and identify ways of improving self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This is key to the long-term recovery of the region. This exciting new project is being piloted with the local authority in Zhytkovichy, Belarus, where we are transforming a derelict building into a modern, multi-purpose Social and Community Services Centre.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and acclaim the thousands of individuals in so many organisations, voluntary and Governmental, who have worked so hard and so diligently to alleviate the plight of the victims of this Chernobyl catastrophe. The importance of the contribution of the voluntary sector and NGOs the world over in offering help and hope should not be underestimated. Their work has ensured that the plight of those most affected by this disaster has not been forgotten. Their contribution has been invaluable and incalculable.

One such organisation, is Chabad's Children of Chernobyl, who very recently lost one of its great advocates and campaigners when Jay Litvin sadly passed away recently. He will be missed by all those who appreciate all he has done for the children of Chernobyl.

I applaud the organisers of this historic gathering, Mr Egeland and OCHA, and to HBO for their very kind permission to show the film 'Chernobyl Heart' at this event. And of course to Maryann, thank you for making this film.

With my hand on my heart, with the image of that little girl in the documentary with her little heart beating before me. I appeal to your hearts, perhaps even more so to your heads. I beg you to resolve and to implement further programmes that can alleviate the suffering of so many innocent victims; allot further financial aid that can provide vital medical and humanitarian aid; and I urge that the date of commencement for the reconstruction of the concrete sarcophagus over the damaged reactor at Chernobyl be set and made urgent and high priority - lest, God forbid and protect us all, Chernobyl becomes the 'next Chernobyl'.

Thank you for your attendance and for your attentiveness ...I'll finish with an old Irish proverb that says, 'Is ar scáth a chéile, a mhaireann na daoine ', which translates loosely that it is in each others shadow that the people survive. We have this evening opened up our hearts and minds to en-shadow and embrace the innocent victims of Chernobyl so that they and indeed so that we too, may live and survive and find hope in each others hearts and minds. Thank you.