

“Twenty Years after Chernobyl Accident – Future Outlook”
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(on behalf of Mr. Kemal Dervis
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Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen!

It is a great honor for me to be here in Ukraine to address this distinguished gathering on the solemn occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.]]

Today I am speaking not only in my own name but also on behalf of Mr. Kemal Dervis, the UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Coordinator of International Cooperation on Chernobyl. Mr Dervis was looking forward to attending this event and paying an official visit to Ukraine, but a sudden illness has unfortunately prevented him from traveling. He sends his regrets.

Ladies and gentlemen!

As Ukraine and its people know well, the legacy of Chernobyl is very much with us today, even after two decades. The lingering impact is symbolized by the rusting ruins of the disabled reactor complex that lies just 140 km north of your stunningly beautiful capital city, with its glorious 1,520-year history.

Responsibility for the accident, and for the secretive policies pursued in its aftermath, lies with an entity that no longer exists: the Soviet Union. Within a few short years of the accident, the Soviet system had collapsed, leaving the three successor states to cope with the consequences of a man-made disaster for which the guilty party had vanished.

The weight of these consequences fell exceptionally hard on Ukraine, which through the simple fact of geography inherited lonely responsibility for the damaged reactor.

Ukraine has shown itself to be a good global citizen by agreeing to shut down the rest of the Chernobyl reactors. It is fitting that the international community has pledged \$1 billion to fund the construction of a new safe “shelter” for the damaged reactor.

The human impact of the Chernobyl accident has been far more disturbing than the fate of the damaged reactor. Yet the residents of the region have yet to see a comparable outpouring of international financial generosity to assist in their own recovery.

That is why it is our duty to remember the vast human cost of Chernobyl. Hundreds of emergency workers selflessly risked their lives in the first, chaotic days, and some sadly perished. Hundreds of thousands of “liquidators” labored to build the sarcophagus. 330,000 residents were uprooted from their homes. Millions of people in the vast territories touched by fallout have lived for decades in fear and uncertainty.

This year’s anniversary provides a solemn occasion to remember the suffering of the millions of people affected by Chernobyl, and to honor the memory of those who perished. These sacrifices must never be forgotten.

As we pay our respects to the past, however, we need also to look ahead to the future, as the title of this conference, “Future outlook,” so aptly suggests.

Since the accident, the challenge for the UN and the international community has been how best to assist the victims. Initial efforts naturally focused on protecting people from radiation and monitoring and tending to health care needs.

Over time, however, the emphasis has shifted, and in 2002 the UN made a major shift in strategy on Chernobyl. It recognized that the biggest challenge to most of the affected regions was not radiation, but rather a lack of social and economic opportunities, compounded by a profound malaise caused by deep fear, lasting uncertainty and social stigmatization.

To meet this challenge, the UN family has resolved to focus on promoting social and economic development, by helping to create new livelihoods and rebuild a sense of community self-reliance.

The new UN development approach is already yielding practical results, in three important areas: first, the provision of factual and credible information; second, community social and economic recovery; and third, policy advice.

Access to credible and accurate information, the first area, has long been an urgent need for Chernobyl populations. Myths and misconceptions about the impact of radiation are widespread. Many area residents feel themselves condemned by radiation exposure to ill health and early death. Young couples worry about having children. Preventable health conditions are mistakenly blamed on Chernobyl.

Such persistent confusion prompted the creation three years ago of the Chernobyl Forum, a consortium of eight UN agencies and the governments of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

The Chernobyl Forum is the UN's most significant initiative on Chernobyl in many years. Its mission was to conduct a rigorous review of scientific evidence to reach conclusive findings on Chernobyl's impact on health and the environment.

Last September the Chernobyl Forum presented its findings. You will hear more about these later today, but let me summarize by saying that they provide a broadly reassuring message to people living in the affected regions. The five million people residing in contaminated regions need not live in fear of radiation. This authoritative finding is cause for cheer.

The UN General Assembly has embraced the Chernobyl Forum consensus in a 2005 resolution. The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, will use the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl this week to call for the widest possible dissemination of the findings among the affected populations.

This is a goal that the entire UN system has embraced – to help communities in affected areas gain a more accurate, realistic sense of the health risks they face, both from radiation and from other sources.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Accurate information is a building block for the second area of our work that I want to discuss here: community recovery.

The past two decades have left the mainly rural communities of the Chernobyl area in a sorry state. Resettlement, restrictions on agriculture, the departure of the young and the skilled, new market rigors after 1991 – all have weakened the region's social and economic fabric.

As a result, unemployment is high and poverty is a real threat. Many communities feel that the state has neglected or even abandoned them. Extensive assistance programs have had the unintended effect of encouraging passive dependency rather than self-reliance. Many residents see themselves as helpless victims rather than sturdy survivors.

To overcome this challenge, UNDP is working hand in hand with local authorities in affected communities to help create new and sustainable livelihoods. In Ukraine, our Chernobyl Recovery and Development Program assists villages and towns in projects that create jobs and meet priority community needs – whether through the construction of a youth center or a health clinic, the expansion of a school, or the extension of a gas line.

Our efforts rely on the participation of the beneficiaries themselves, and have the dual aim of helping communities to regain a sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

The Chernobyl Recovery and Development Program is currently active in 17 rayons in the four most affected oblasts of Ukraine. It has helped form more than 200 community

organizations in 139 villages, with a total of 20,000 members. Over two years these community organizations have implemented more than 100 projects.

More significant than these numbers, however, is the impact on community attitudes, transforming a deep-seated helplessness into a spirit of activism.

This approach, we feel, gives real meaning to what is all too often just an empty slogan: “democratic governance.” By encouraging residents to take fate into their own hands, we are confident we are helping to build sturdy local foundations for a robust democracy.

We salute Ukraine’s achievements in this democratic quest, particularly the recent holding of free and fair parliamentary elections – a remarkable success in this part of the world.

Ladies and gentlemen!

This brings me to the third area in which we can provide assistance in Chornobyl recovery efforts: advice on government policies.

We are proposing a fresh look at government spending on Chornobyl, to find ways in which limited resources might be used more efficiently to promote social and economic recovery, as well as to assist those in dire need.

The point is not just to revisit policies specific to Chornobyl. Ukraine also needs to adjust broader economic and social policies in ways that will spur economic development nationwide, including, inevitably, in the Chornobyl regions. This applies to regulations on the creation of small businesses, on licensing and inspection, on investment, on finance, and on property rights.

These are all areas where the UN family can draw upon a vast store of global experience to help Ukraine find the shortest path to prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen!

We are very proud of our achievements in Ukraine, working together with local, regional and national authorities. These beginnings explain why we believe that the future of the Chornobyl-affected areas is far from bleak.

The toll of the accident has been huge; that is clear. We can never forget the suffering that it caused. There is a way forward, however. There are solutions to the problems that communities face, and a wealth of global development experience upon which to draw.

Put simply, there is hope.

What is in short supply, as always, is funding.

The international community has been extremely generous in financing a new reactor shelter to protect the world from any potential new escape of radiation. Similar generosity directed towards the affected communities would do much to restore the region's social and economic vitality and help Chernobyl victims at last come to see themselves as successful survivors.

Thank you.