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Press Release

PRESS CONFERENCE ON FUNDING TO ADDRESS EFFECTS OF CHERNOBYL DISASTER

The urgent need for funds to help alleviate the continuing effects of the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl power plant was stressed this afternoon at a Headquarters press conference by the Permanent Representatives of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Also participating was Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

"You don't overcome the consequences of a nuclear tragedy in a matter of months or even years", the Under-Secretary-General told correspondents, recalling that the tragedy had occurred on 26 April 1986. Twelve years later, there was nothing to celebrate. Instead, awareness, commitment, solidarity and compassion needed to be revived and generated. For those purposes, the help of the international media was being sought.

Mr. Vieira de Mello said he had chaired a donor pledging conference in Geneva on 26 March to raise funds for an inter-agency programme of international assistance to areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster. The programme consisted of projects that were focused, realistic and humane. However, only \$1.4 million had been raised, to his extreme frustration and disappointment, as well as the disappointment of the three affected countries.

A few days ago, the United Nations Women's Guild, with virtually no means at its disposal, had brought eight children from affected areas to New York, he went on to say. The children ranged in age from 8 to 12, meaning that most of them had been born following the disaster. They spent a few days in New York, and visited the Secretariat building. They seemed like normal children, with only one exception: all of them suffered from leukemia or cancer. One girl, who now lived in Minsk, had said she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up, because she had discovered how important that profession was. The problem was, she would probably not survive to study at the university level.

The inter-agency programme consisted of projects to deal with problems in health, especially in the areas of treatment and research, as well as with psycho-social and environmental rehabilitation, he said. Those efforts were distinct from what was known

as the "sarcophagus project", intended to neutralize and bury the nuclear reactor itself once and for all.

The projects for which funding was being sought were humanitarian efforts aimed at addressing the human consequences of Chernobyl, he said. In addition to the bilateral assistance that had been provided to the three countries, the inter-agency programme would enable affected populations to lead a normal life, to the extent that the term could be applied to persons affected by radioactive catastrophes.

He said the projects included diagnosis and treatment of thyroid carcinoma, leukemia and lymphomas, as well as research on the consequences of radiation in parents, in order to determine the health of their descendants. Other projects involved medical treatment and evaluation, and the modernization of clinics and hospitals. The programme also included work to develop a method of determining people's level of strontium 90 [a radioactive isotope of the metallic element strontium].

Tens of thousands of "nuclear fighters" who had intervened during the early stages of the catastrophe had been gravely affected by the radiation, the Under-Secretary-General said. The inter-agency programme would help them survive, if at all possible. Other endeavors involved forestry activities, increasing the supply of clean drinking water, and establishing a laboratory for monitoring the safety of agricultural projects.

The projects were focused, Mr. Vieira de Mello stressed. Although the response to the donor conference had been disappointing, efforts to raise funds and fill the gaps between bilateral and United Nations assistance would continue. United Nations assistance was an effective vehicle for expressing international solidarity and compassion. He asked the international media again for its help.

The Ambassador of Belarus, Mr. Sychou, said that more than 70 per cent of the radionuclides from the Chernobyl disaster had fallen on the territory of Belarus, resulting in the long-term contamination of nearly 23 per cent of the country's territory. Belarus had lost the use of land and forests.

In Belarus, more than 130,000 persons had been resettled from contaminated areas to the clean regions, he said. The total damage to the country as a result of the catastrophe had been estimated at a total of \$235 billion. During the past 12 years, his Government had allocated between 15 and 20 per cent of its national budget for mitigating the consequences of the accident. After 12 years, problems in the health, social, economic and ecological sectors remained acute.

The Government was particularly concerned about the health of its people, Mr. Sychou said. About 1.8 million persons now lived in contaminated areas. Over the past two years, those areas had witnessed an increase in child mortality due to cancer. Providing adequate medical treatment for those people remained one of his Government's priorities.

In view of these continuing problems, as well as the economic difficulties associated with the country's transition period, it was hoped that the international community would provide technical and financial support, he said. He expressed gratitude to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Under-Secretary-General for convening the

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donor conference last March to find the money to implement the inter-agency programme, which consisted of 29 projects.

Unfortunately, that conference had only yielded \$1.4 million for the programme's implementation, while the implementation cost was put at \$74 million, the Ambassador said. He appealed to donor countries for additional financial assistance, and urged members of the media to play a more active role in disseminating information about the disaster and raising awareness about its consequences.

Ambassador Lavrov of the Russian Federation said that 19 regions and 56 square kilometers of his country had been contaminated as a result of the disaster. Since 1989, his Government had implemented a number of programmes to help those who had been resettled -- some 50,000 persons -- find economic employment and create a new life. More than 2 million square meters of housing had been built, as had hundreds of schools, hospitals and clinics. Thousands of square kilometers of roads had been constructed, as well as gas pipelines and industrial units for agricultural production to provide employment for those affected.

Despite efforts to assist those who had been exposed to radiation and to create medical, radiological and social protection, problems remained severe, Mr. Lavrov said. More than 350,000 Russians had participated in eliminating the consequences of the disaster, and to date, some 40,000 of them had become disabled. Further statistics could be obtained in material from the Russian Mission. He stressed the need for continued help for those people. Such assistance was not merely a humanitarian responsibility, but also involved preventing such occurrences in the future. If such an event occurred again, the international community would be better equipped to help more people and in a more expeditious manner.

Turning next to the inter-agency programme, he said it was the result of intense and cooperative efforts by United Nations system bodies and other groups. All the projects in that programme supplemented ongoing projects and were coordinated with existing activities.

The response during the latest donor conference was disappointing, Mr. Lavrov said. However, he hoped to raise the international donor community's awareness with the help of the press. The United Nations could raise awareness to some degree, but members of

the media must help raise the world community's awareness of such issues as the lasting effects of Chernobyl.

Mr. Lavrov expressed the hope that the fund created by Ted Turner for extrabudgetary and humanitarian projects would consider financing some of the projects in the inter-agency programme. He repeated his request that correspondents endeavour to highlight the legacy of the Chernobyl disaster for

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the international donor community, and expressed appreciation for any such efforts.

The Ambassador of Ukraine, Volodymyr Y. Yel'chenko, said the Chernobyl catastrophe had occurred in Ukraine, and although its consequences affected all three countries, Ukraine carried the heaviest part of the burden. For his country, the irreversible losses caused by the accident came to some \$120-130 billion -- more than six times its current national income. The Government had allocated more than \$1 billion annually for the social protection of the affected population. However, efforts to date did not match real needs.

The Chernobyl accident was a result of mankind's search for new energy sources, he said. The disaster had occurred because of a short-sighted policy vision by the leaders of the former Soviet Union. Now the people of Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation were forced to pay the price for that lack of vision.

He said it was only last year, 11 years after the catastrophe, that a decision had been taken on other countries' participation in funding the construction of a new shelter over the damaged unit. Ukraine and the members of the Group of Seven industrialized States had signed a Memorandum of Understanding on measures to be taken to close the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The Government of Ukraine was striving to meet its commitments and was thus entitled to expect the same from its partners. Mankind might not survive another Chernobyl, he said.

A correspondent asked Mr. Lavrov whether attempts had already been made to have money from the Turner Fund allocated to Chernobyl-related projects. The Russian Ambassador said discussions had been held with the Executive Director of the United Nations International Partnership Trust Fund, Miles Stoby, and a letter sent to the Secretariat suggesting that it consider funding some of the Chernobyl projects. He looked forward to continued discussion with those involved.

Asked who had made those requests, Mr. Lavrov said the Russian Federation had sent a letter describing a number of projects, including demining in certain conflict areas in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. On Chernobyl, the request had referred to the inter-agency projects, which concerned all three countries.

Some \$3 billion in assistance had been earmarked for assistance by the Group of Seven in 1995, a correspondent said. How much had gotten through, and did Russia intend to raise the question at the meeting of the Group of Seven to be held in Birmingham later in the month? Mr. Yel'chenko said that the pledge had been for about \$300 million by the European Commission.

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Directing her question to the Ukrainian Ambassador, a correspondent asked whether it was safe to reactivate one or more plants at the Chernobyl site. To be certain that the site was safe, some initiative must be implemented there, Mr. Yel'chenko said. Scientific research was being conducted by Ukrainian scientists and international experts. Money was needed to create a reliable basis of information, as well as to obtain techniques and materials. Unless those programmes indicated in the Memorandum of Understanding between Ukraine and the Group of Seven were implemented, it was difficult the safety of the plant.

What was the status of implementation of the plan for closing the Chernobyl nuclear plant by the year 2000? a correspondent asked. Mr. Yel'chenko said the fourth reactor was ruined and not operative. The first reactor was operating, while the second had been shut down about two years ago. The third had been under normal repair for around a year and was now ready for operation. The decision had been taken to switch it on after the holding of the meeting of the European Bank on Reconstruction and Development in Kiev this May.

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