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## **UN Report says Chernobyl disaster still hurting millions**

### **UN Agencies Call For New International Effort to Restore Normalcy**

NEW YORK, 6 February -- The United Nations called today for an entirely new approach to helping millions of people impacted by the Chernobyl nuclear accident, saying that 16 years after the incident those affected remain in a state of "chronic dependency," with few opportunities and little control over their destinies. The United Nations warned that populations in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine would continue to experience general decline unless significant new measures are adopted to address health, the environment and unemployment.

These conclusions are contained in a comprehensive study of the countries and populations affected by the Chernobyl disaster, released today by the United Nations at a press conference in New York. The study, carried out by an international panel of experts in July-August 2001, was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and was supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

At the centre of the report's findings lies the conclusion that a fundamental shift is needed in the way assistance is delivered to the people still suffering from the Chernobyl disaster, emphasizing long-term community redevelopment and empowerment in which the affected populations play a key role. The "Emergency Phase" of the response emphasizing containment, relocation, and direct welfare is now over, argues the report, and a new 10-year "Recovery Phase" must gradually replace it. The report calls for a series of national workshops in the three countries most affected -- Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine -- to gain consensus around new approaches emphasizing basic health services, economic development, creative ecological measures, and focused international research on a series of unresolved health questions.

Among many other measures, the report proposes:

-- Resources should be concentrated on mainstream services which have the greatest effect on life expectancy and general well-being, including primary health care, health education, clean water and economic development.

-- Expanded health reform in the three countries, ensuring that services are delivered on the basis of medical need and that poor rural communities get improved care. Reformed medical services should also address the effects of social and environmental factors on health, including poverty, poor diet, alcoholism, tobacco abuse and poor living conditions.

-- A long-term, independent, properly funded and internationally recognized programme of research on the lasting environmental and health effects of Chernobyl.

-- Special attention to the lifetime needs of people who were infants or children at the time of the accident, lived in the areas affected by the fallout of radioactive iodine and may have contracted or be at risk of thyroid cancer, which has emerged as a primary threat.

-- Attention to research showing that the psycho-social welfare of people who stayed in their homes is better than that of those who were relocated, along with new studies examining how far the present regime of residency restrictions could responsibly be relaxed to enable a growing number of people wishing to return to make informed decisions about the risk.

-- Intensive economic measures aimed at expanding self-sufficiency among those most affected, along with ongoing but more focused direct support until such self-sufficiency is achieved. National policies that bring about an investment-friendly business environment, including village-level enterprise zones, and business development incentives in towns and cities adjacent to the most affected areas. Special emphasis must be put on the local agricultural economy.

Improvement of environmental policy planning, implementation and management at the local, national and transnational levels to build on lessons learned and develop innovative approaches to land use as the radiation threat diminishes over time. Ongoing and focused research on the impact of radioactive contamination on the environment, including in the water, with special attention to the impact on hunters, forestry workers, and others who rely on the land for their incomes.

The report recognizes the lead role that has been played by the respective governments involved, and notes the enormous investment of resources that they have made into the humanitarian relief effort over the last 15 years. But it also calls on international donors and governments to continue to play an active supporting role.

The report emphasizes the need for the next phase to focus attention on two affected groups: First, the 100,000 to 200,000 people who live in severely contaminated areas, unemployed re-settlers, and those whose health is most directly threatened, including victims of thyroid cancer. Some 2,000 persons have been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, and as many as 8,000 to 10,000 cases are expected to develop it over the coming years. The report states that this group is at the core of the cluster of problems created by Chernobyl, and focusing on their needs and helping them take control of their destinies must be a priority.

Second, the report finds that there are hundreds of thousands of people whose lives have been directly and significantly affected but who are already in a position to support themselves. This group has found employment, and needs as a priority to be reintegrated into the society as a whole, so that their needs are addressed through mainstream provisions and criteria.

The three affected countries and the international community need to join forces in moving towards a new phase of recovery and sustainable development. The aim should be to "work toward normalizing the situation of the individuals and communities concerned in the medium and long term." This depends on a holistic approach to addressing the medical, environmental and economic problems faced by the affected people and enabling them to take more control over their futures.

According to the report, such a transition is long overdue and is not a "second best" solution. "Within the available budgets it is really the only alternative to the progressive breakdown of the recovery effort, continuing hemorrhaging of scarce resources, and continuing distress for the people at the centre of the problem."

For further information, please contact David A. Chikvaidze (OCHA) at 212-963-9665; Erin Trowbridge (UNDP) at 212-906-5344; Alfred Ironside (UNICEF) at 212-326-7261.

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