



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin Cardin

Ranking Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Twenty years ago, the word Chernobyl entered our lexicon, and, more importantly, the world's consciousness. That catastrophe, the largest nuclear accident in history, released hundreds of times the radiation of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts. The consequences of Chernobyl on human health, the environment and on the social and economic fabric of the countries most affected have been profound and have implications for generations to come.

In marking the 20th anniversary of that tragedy, we remember all of its victims, including all of the emergency and recovery operation workers – the “liquidators” – many of whom were also victimized by a system steeped in secrecy. We remember that the accident has had an adverse impact on the lives and health of millions of men, women and children in the contaminated areas of Belarus and Ukraine as well as parts of Russia. While we remember the victims who have succumb, we must also commit ourselves to continue to provide help those people whose lives are – and will continue to be – impacted by Chernobyl.

An important lesson from Chernobyl – one that remains relevant today – is the importance of transparency in governance. The nature of the Soviet system did not lead to a humane or rational response to the tragedy. Silence and obfuscation in the immediate aftermath of the accident perhaps manifested itself most starkly in the failure of the authorities to provide the population of surrounding areas with timely warnings regarding the dangers posed by the massive fallout of radiation. The consequences of this secrecy remain with us to this day. They are a vivid reminder of the value of open democratic and accountable governments which respect the human rights and dignity of the individual. Regrettably, some in the region prefer to cling to the past, failing to heed the lessons of Chernobyl.

As Chairman of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, I am interested in exploring how the OSCE might play a positive role in alleviating the consequences of Chernobyl on the participating States that bore the brunt of the impact: Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia. I plan to raise this issue at our Committee session during our Annual Meeting in Brussels, and I am hopeful that the Committee will address this issue in its resolution that will be incorporated into the Brussels Declaration. The international community has helped in this effort, by increasing the financial commitments to the Chernobyl Shelter Fund to \$1 billion. I am encouraged by President Yushchenko's recent statement that the construction of a new structure over the damaged reactor will be completed in 2010, and heartened that the United States has made – and will continue to make – substantial contributions to this and other Chernobyl-related projects.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today.