

Statement by the Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

The Legacy of Chernobyl: Health and Safety 20 Years Later

April 25, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling today's hearing on the consequences and responses to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Twenty years ago today, explosions at one of the reactors in Chernobyl resulted in the release of radioactive materials to areas in what is now the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In both the immediate aftermath of the accident and in the years following, hundreds of thousands of people were exposed to extremely high doses of radiation, with over 100 deaths occurring in 1986 as a result of acute radiation sickness. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that almost 300,000 individuals still live in areas contaminated by the disaster.

However, it is only in the past few years that the true impact of the Chernobyl disaster has emerged. Radiation health experts tell us that most cancers that result from radiation exposure do not develop for decades. Already, we are seeing an increase in thyroid cancer among Chernobyl survivors - an increase attributable to the consumption of contaminated milk by children in the aftermath of the accident, many of whom had iodine deficiencies which made them more susceptible to the high levels of radioactive iodine resulting from the explosion. The WHO estimates that about 9,000 of the individuals exposed will die from Chernobyl-related cancers.

In addition to the threat of cancer and other radiation-related conditions, many of the individuals in Chernobyl and the surrounding cities faced significant mental health challenges, some of which have not yet been resolved, resulting from their evacuations following the accident, the uncertainty surrounding their physical health, and the stigma they faced when they were relocated to new communities.

While I was First Lady, I had the opportunity to visit the Ukraine, and was impressed by the dedication of doctors and nurses in Belarus and Ukraine who were trying to keep affected children alive. I am proud to note that our government helped provide support for airlifts and other shipments of essential items to assist the hospitals treating families in the aftermath of this disaster. Through our partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, we helped to set new standards for the post-Soviet medical system, with delivery of new technology, physician training programs and critically important hospital supplies.

During the Clinton Administration, we also made significant gains in working with the government of the Ukraine, as well as the G-7, to help mitigate the environmental and social impacts of this disaster. Our government provided over \$200 million to help ensure

safe containment and closure of the Chernobyl site, and increase safety at other nuclear facilities. We also worked to address the needs of displaced workers, helping them find other jobs and receive additional training. I believe that we must continue to help those impacted by this disaster, especially as long-term health impacts appear.

I appreciate the opportunity that today's hearing presents to raise the issues of areas where Chernobyl continues to have an effect on all of us, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on this Committee and the Administration to ensure that our government continue to be responsive to the needs of those who lived through this tragedy. Thank you.