



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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As the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl approaches in Belarus, and the opposition forces plan a final protest march on April 26 in the aftermath of the presidential elections, there is no sign that the country has come close to overcoming the profound health, social, and environmental problems caused by the nuclear accident.

The issue has been clouded by two factors. First, there is the politicization of the Chernobyl event as a symbol of the confrontation between the president and the opposition, particularly the united democratic forces behind candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich. Second, there has been a rather unseemly international dispute as to the health effects of Chernobyl, and particularly the long-term mortality rates from radiation-induced cancers.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka marked the previous two anniversaries with visits to the Chernobyl zone, which were marked with intensive TV publicity and the overall message that if the area was dangerous, then the president of the country would not be visiting there. Though parts of the zone—especially Homel’ region—have been depopulated, students and migrants are being used to cultivate land that remains contaminated with radio-nuclides, particularly Cesium-137 and Strontium-90. The president has detained several scientists whose findings contradict the official position that the accident in Belarus has been largely overcome, and using the forces of the government without outside assistance.

The government of Belarus did not agree with some of the findings of the Chernobyl Forum Report, issued in September 2005. That report, the most comprehensive to date, demonstrated the enormous health and psychological impact of the accident in Belarus.

About 90% of the republic was irradiated with short-lived radio-nuclides, deposited by the “radiation cloud” that was formed after the two steam explosions at the fourth reactor unit of the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the early morning of April 26, 1986. The reaction of the republican authorities was delayed by the lack of information about what had happened from both the Soviet authorities in Moscow, and the Ukrainian party leadership in Kyiv.

The radioactive iodine (Iodine-131 with a half-life of 8 days) was to take a serious toll and has resulted in some 4,000 cases of thyroid gland cancer to date (over 9,000 including Ukraine and Russia), almost a quarter of them in young children, and in most instances contracted after

1989. Long-term effects are equally serious. Over the 17-year period 1986-2003, surgery had been carried out on almost 2,000 young adults and children, and 19 have died as a result of the progression of the tumors. About 23% of Belarus was contaminated with Cesium and Strontium, and about 2% of the territory affected with Plutonium radio-nuclides (half-life 24,000 years). Many of the affected regions did not take any preventive action until 1989, when it was revealed officially that they formed part of the contaminated zone. Belarus lost a quarter of its valuable forests.

Today about 1.5 million residents of Belarus are provided with medical assistance as a result of the 1986 disaster. Among those Belarusians that took part in the cleanup operations—they are referred to today as “liquidators,” a term reminiscent of the Stalin era—there have been registered more than 2,800 first-time cases of cancer, and in 73% of these incidences it occurred among those working in the zone in 1986-88. Over 300,000 children continue to reside in the most affected regions of Homel’ and Mahileu. They suffer from a rise in frequency of sicknesses of all types, but particularly respiratory diseases, digestive problems, and childhood diabetes. Among the age group 10-14, for example, newly formed cancers in the Chernobyl zones exceed those in the “clean” region of Vitsebsk by 1.5 times, and the incidence of endocrinal pathology is double the average in clean areas.

This disturbing picture has been partly concealed by an international dispute over the “true” health effects of Chernobyl, and the number of long-term mortalities. Two reports are now extant: the Chernobyl Forum Report (CFR) (2005) and the Greenpeace Report (2006). The latter raises the number of long-term victims to over 90,000, and reports some 34,000 deaths to date among liquidators. However, the dispute is largely contrived. It derives from the unfortunate and misleading press releases issued by representatives of the Chernobyl Forum, which do not reflect accurately the contents of the CFR. The issue of 4,000 long-term deaths is even belied by the CFR itself, which includes a table indicating some 9,000 long-term deaths.

Even that figure pertains only to a small fraction of the lands contaminated by Chernobyl, namely the republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Most European countries and several other Soviet republics were contaminated by the “radiation cloud,” and in some cases (southern Germany, parts of Scandinavia, Greece and others) the long-term effects have been serious. Neither report really disputes that the Chernobyl-linked cancer deaths will be in the tens of thousands. The Belarusian government, which is listed as one of the authors of the CFR, would have been content with the misleading press release (less than 60 current casualties and under 4,000 long-term), but not with the figures within or in the heated Greenpeace Report, comprised mainly from the research of Ukrainian scientists.

For the 1.5 million still requiring medical attention from the disaster, such arguments are largely irrelevant. Most of them have lived off contaminated land for the past 20 years, their benefits now reduced, and their concerns leading to “psychological stress” and “dependency.” The impact of Chernobyl has not dissipated after two decades.