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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
"The Legacy of Chornobyl: Health and Safety 20 Years Later"
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On behalf of Chernobyl Children's Project International, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this important topic.

Chernobyl Children's Project International— a partnership between citizens of the United States and Ireland — has worked with Chernobyl survivors in Belarus for 15 years. We are a largely volunteer organization — the backbone of our work is professionals who give up their vacations and raise their own funds to donate their time and skills. We have delivered over \$70 million in humanitarian and medical aid, all of it privately funded. Working in partnership with NGOs, medical facilities and citizens in Belarus, we provide a life-saving children's cardiac surgery program, community care programs for disabled children and their families, nursing and therapeutic programs and training, foster homes and hospice services for the most seriously ill children.

The disaster at Chernobyl happened on Ukrainian soil, and is typically thought of as a Ukrainian problem. As this audience well knows, it has profoundly affected the people of Ukraine. As well, the disaster made a deep impact on the people and economy of Belarus.

The government of Belarus reports that it spends 10 – 20% of its annual budget responding to the Chernobyl aftermath, and estimates that the total cost of dealing with the disaster will be \$235 billion.

These are economic statistics, and they don't begin to scratch the surface of how the Chernobyl accident continues to affect the daily lives of families in Belarus.

I returned only days ago from the International Chernobyl Conference, held in Minsk at the Palace of the Republic. On day one, 25 speakers in a row made their statements about the legacy of Chernobyl. I'm proud to say, that as the politicians and policy makers talked about Chernobyl, Chernobyl Children's Project International volunteers were on the ground delivering \$3.5 million dollars in privately funded medical and humanitarian aid to the most remote regions of Belarus; performing life saving cardiac surgery on children in Minsk, and working with severely mentally and physically handicapped children in southwest Belarus. Leaving the conference to visit poorer families in the concrete jungles of the city and in the most remote villages, I was once again struck by the contrast, and by how hard it is for words ringing in a grand hall to truly convey how Chernobyl continues to affect the lives of many citizens in Belarus.

Today in Belarus, 20% of the territory is contaminated by radiation and cannot be occupied or farmed. 1.5 million people – 15% of the population -- continue to live in contaminated zones. Over 420,000 of them are children. These are people who eat locally grown and gathered foods, who in rural areas heat their homes with contaminated peat and wood -- and have done so for two decades. Perhaps we can better appreciate these numbers by imagining that 45 million US citizens lived on radiation-contaminated ground. How would we respond?

I submit my testimony without the authority of a doctor, historian, scientist or public policy maker. I can only speak as a representative of one of a number of NGOs who work side by side with citizens and health professionals in Belarus, and who have first hand knowledge of the social, economic and health needs of the communities we serve. The link between dramatic increases in thyroid cancer and Chernobyl has finally been widely acknowledged. But thyroid cancer is only one of many health problems we see in Chernobyl affected communities. Our colleagues in Belarus and in Ukraine observe and have documented increases in non thyroid cancers, birth defects, and cardiac and immune disorders since 1986. Dr. William Novick, our board member and medical director of the International Children's Heart Foundation will testify before Congress later this week to his research finding a nearly three-fold increase in a rare cardiac birth defect since 1986. The Belarusian Academy of Sciences reports that among children, morbidity (sickness) has increased by almost one-third, new cancers by 1.5 times, and blood diseases by 1.5 times. Sixty to 70% of Belarusians who live in contaminated zones who have been checked at the Belarusian Institute of Radiation Medicine have critical levels of radiation in their bodies. We often hear doctors and nurses talk of "Chernobyl AIDS" – a general weakening of the immune system. In 2004, the Swiss Medical Weekly published a study finding that pre-menopausal breast cancer rates were up 40% in Belarus. I could go on.

Countless stories of terrible suffering and fear are behind these statistics, which I quote not as a scientist, but because they are consistent with our observations on the ground. Are these observed health problems the result of radiation, or of something else? Reputable scientists and researchers are in sharp disagreement – and this in itself should make us stop and think – and recognize that it is far too soon to say we know all there is to know about the long term effects of radiation on human health. Clearly, it is appropriate for us to remain vigilant, keep our minds open to what we hear from the affected regions, continue research, and not lose the important opportunity to develop the screening and early intervention programs which are so important. NGOs such as Chernobyl Children's Project International aren't in a position to argue about statistics – we have to stay focused on responding to what we see in the field.

When looking at the continuing impact of the Chernobyl disaster we must not focus exclusively on the important issue of how radiation affects human health. We will hear a lot about the Chernobyl Forum Report of the United Nations and International Atomic Energy Agency in this hearing, and we are skeptical of the reassuring health findings noted in the report only because they are in such sharp contrast to what we hear on the ground. But at the same time, we welcome the important analysis in the report of the complex web of social, medical, economic, and environmental factors that contribute to

suffering in Chernobyl affected regions. Chernobyl released not only radiation, but a series of events – such as massive relocation and loss of economic stability – that were closely followed by the immense social, economic and cultural changes that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union. NGOs working with Chernobyl survivors must address the complex interplay of factors that impact the quality of life in the communities in which we work – troubling health problems, poverty, lack of economic opportunity, inadequate health care, and environmental degradation.

I can personally attest to the psychological impact of Chernobyl in the villages and communities I have visited, particularly among the thousands of families who were dislocated from villages that had been their homes for generations and have had understandable difficulty adjusting to their new situation. In hospitals and villages throughout Belarus, I've met women who are afraid to bear children or to breast feed, and countless families who struggle not only with poverty but with alcohol addiction, chronic health problems, and despair for their children's futures. In many villages and city apartments, it is the rule and not the exception to see extended families held together by an elderly grandmother, or a single parent. Lack of the most basic community support services leads many families to abandon their children to orphanages. We strongly support a community-based approach of working side by side with citizens help them get back control of their lives.

The international and NGO communities play an important role in improving the health and living circumstances of Chernobyl survivors. We applaud the World Bank's recent approval of a \$50 million dollar loan to Belarus to provide an energy infrastructure to homes, schools, hospitals and orphanages that now use ancient systems or burn contaminated peat and wood. I've personally visited dozens of village families raising children inside sooty, moldy, suffocating homes and I've slept in cold, damp orphanages. This program, and programs such as the CORE Program (a joint project of the United Nations Development Program and the Belarusian government) are important because they support long term and sustainable improvements to the quality of life and health in Chernobyl communities. NGOs need to support these programs, but also recognize that Chernobyl survivors have immediate needs and lives can be saved today through our intervention – especially intervention with children and expectant mothers, and programs such as UNICEF's call for salt iodization in central and eastern Europe. At the same time, we need to invest in research to better understand the effects of radiation on human health.

Chernobyl Children's Project International is committed to continuing our work to provide both long term hope and to alleviate immediate suffering due to Chernobyl. We are not alone in our response. The International Red Cross has screened over 600,000 children for early signs of thyroid cancer in Belarus and Ukraine. Last week, Chernobyl Children's Project International was able to donate a mobile thyroid-monitoring vehicle to support their important work. Our cardiac program partners the International Children's Heart Foundation save almost 100 young lives a year in Belarus, and thousands more all over the world, while providing training for local physicians. The Children of Chernobyl Relief and Development Fund is internationally recognized for

their work with hospitals in Ukraine and this week their airlift in partnership with the US State Department delivered \$2 million dollars worth of vital medications and health care equipment. This Friday, CitiHope International, working in partnership with the US State Department and Heart to Heart International will land a medical airlift in Belarus containing \$4.5 million dollars in pharmaceutical and medical supplies.

As we approach the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl, we cannot forget the people who have survived an unprecedented industrial disaster, and a profound political, social and economic upheaval that was not of their making. At the same time, we cannot forget the lessons of Chernobyl and how it reminds us of the delicate balance between technology, nature, and human life – and the acknowledgement that any choices that we make have a price. I know that I speak for most Americans when I express the hope that our future energy decisions will place the highest priority on safety and security.

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