

USSR - SOVIET PRESS RISES TO THE CHERNOBYL CHALLENGE

LONDON, JUNE 18 - (SPECIAL) - THE GUARDIAN HAS AN ARTICLE BY MARTIN WALKER IN MOSCOW WHICH READS AS FOLLOWS:

THE SOVIET PRESS HAS BELATEDLY RISEN TO THE CHALLENGE OF CHERNOBYL AND HAS FOR THE PAST MONTH PROVIDED A FLOW OF INFORMATION ON ALMOST EVERY ASPECT OF THE ENORMOUS EFFORT GOING INTO THE CONTAINMENT AND CLEAN-UP OF THE DISASTER.

NIKOLAI MATUKOVSKY, OF IZVESTIA, REPORTED ON THE "UNUSUAL AND BRAVE DECISION" NOT TO EVACUATE THE SMALL TOWN OF BRAGIN, ABOUT 50 MILES NORTH OF CHERNOBYL AND WELL OUTSIDE THE EVACUATION ZONE.

"THE LEVEL OF RADIATION DID NOT PRESENT AN IMMEDIATE HEALTH HAZARD, BUT IT WOULD NOT BE HARMLESS IF PEOPLE LIVED THERE FOR MONTHS, LET ALONE YEARS," MR MATUKOVSKY SAID. "BUT WITH 30,000 PEOPLE FROM BYELORUSSIA ALREADY EVACUATED, ANY EXTRA EVACUEES WOULD HAVE REQUIRED EVEN MORE EMERGENCY HOUSING. AFTER LONG CONSULTATIONS WITH SCIENTISTS AND MILITARY SPECIALISTS IT WAS DECIDED TO EVACUATE THE CHILDREN AND THEIR MOTHERS, BUT TO START DECONTAMINATING THE TOWN WHILE THE ADULTS STAYED IN PLACE."

MR MATUKOVSKY WENT ROUND THE TOWN OF 7,000 PEOPLE WATCHING THE CLEAN-UP OPERATION AND TALKING TO THE PEOPLE IN CHARGE. THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL TOLD HIM: "WE COULD NEVER HAVE COPEDED WITHOUT THE ARMY. WE HAD TO WASH DOWN CAREFULLY ALL 1,220 HOUSES, HUNDREDS OF BARN AND GARAGES, AND SCORES OF THOUSANDS OF TREES. WE DID NOT WANT TO CUT THEM DOWN AND LEAVE BRAGIN BALD FOR THE FUTURE."

THE TOWN AUTHORITIES HAD TO MAKE SOME DIFFICULT DECISIONS ABOUT WHERE TO BURY THE TOPSOIL THAT WAS BULLDOZED FROM THE STREETS AND WHERE TO PUT THE SHRUBS AND GARBAGE THAT HAD SOAKED UP HIGH LEVELS OF RADIATION.

BRAGIN IS ON THE FRINGE OF THE PRIPJAT MARSHES AND SURROUNDED BY PEAT BOGS, WHICH ABSORBED MUCH MORE RADIATION THAN ORDINARY SOIL. THE RADIATED TOPSOIL COULD NOT BE BURIED THERE. THE AUTHORITIES FOUND THAT PLOUGHING THE PEAT BOGS REDUCED THE RADIATION AND THAT WATERING AND LIMING THE SOIL WAS EVEN MORE EFFECTIVE.

"COMMON DUST IS THE MAIN SOURCE OF RADIATION, AND TO GET RID OF IT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE WE LAID NEW ASPHALT ON ALL THE STREETS, PAVEMENTS, SQUARES, AND THE LAND NEAR SCHOOLS AND KINDERGARTENS," THE BYELORUSSIAN MINISTER OF COMMUNAL ECONOMY SAID. "MACHINERY AND WORK CREWS CAME FROM ALL OVER THE REST OF BYELORUSSIA TO HELP."

"WATER WAS THE MAIN PROBLEM. WE NEEDED LOTS OF WATER BECAUSE OF THE DECONTAMINATION PROGRAMME. WE DRILLED TWO EXTRA ARTESIAN WELLS, AND CONNECTED THEM TO THE MAIN WATER SUPPLY. WE CLEANED OUT ALL 169 WELLS IN THE TOWN, AND THEN WE HAD TO ENSURE THAT THE WATER WE USED FOR DECONTAMINATION DID NOT RUN OFF INTO THE GROUND WATER."

A PATTERN SLOWLY EMERGED FROM THE IZVESTIA ARTICLE OF THE ENORMOUS ENGINEERING AND MANPOWER EFFORT, USING RESOURCES FROM THE REST OF THE BYELORUSSAIN REPUBLIC, THAT WAS GOING INTO THE PARTIAL EVACUATION AND CLEAN-UP OF A COMMUNITY OF 7,000 PEOPLE.

ALL FOOD HAD TO BE SHIPPED IN, INCLUDING EXTRA SUPPLIES FOR THE WORKERS WHO ARRIVED TO HELP. THE CHAIRMAN OF THE RETAIL COOPERATIVE STORE AND HIS DEPUTY WERE SACKED.

THE WOMEN WHO WERE EVACUATED WITH THEIR CHILDREN HAD BEEN THE MAINSTAY OF THE TOWN'S CATERING SERVICES. PEOPLE FROM OTHER REGIONS WERE BROUGHT IN TO STAFF THE CANTEENS AND PUBLIC DINING HALLS. STAFF WAS STILL SO SHORT THAT A ROTA HAD TO BE DRAWN UP AMONG THE REMAINING WOMEN.

UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS EMERGED, LIKE THE CASE OF THE GLOWING COW MANURE. ANIMAL MANURE CONCENTRATES RADIATION AND SPECIAL PROVISIONS HAD TO BE MADE FOR ITS DISPOSAL.

"AT A LONG DISTANCE FROM BRAGIN," MR MATUKOVSKY WROTE, "YOU STILL SEE THE SIGNS ON THE ROAD TELLING PEOPLE NOT TO SET FOOT ON THE VERGES, WHERE THE THICK GRASS STORES THE RADIATION WASHED OFF THE ROADS. (PTO) FW/

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"BUT ON OUR WAY WE SEE, RIGHT NEAR THOSE SIGNS, HERDS OF CATTLE, AND A GROUP OF A DOZEN PEOPLE CUTTING HAY. AND THEY ARE DOING THIS IN A ZONE OF HIGH RADIATION. ON ONE HAND, WE DIP GEIGER COUNTERS INTO EVERY JAR, BUT THEN WE PASTURE THE CATTLE AND CUT HAY WERE IT IS FORBIDDEN.

"PANIC IS A DANGEROUS ENEMY, AND WE SHOULD BEWARE OF IT. BUT CARELESSNESS AND COMPLACENCY, OR A KIND OF BRAVADO, ARE NO BETTER. IS IT THAT SOME PEOPLE HAVE NOT YET WOKEN UP TO THE DANGERS, OR HAS THEIRS SENSE OF CAUTION GONE BACK TO SLEEP ALREADY? FW/
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