

CHERNOBYL

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B-WIRE

26-APR-89 13:40

USSR -- THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF CHERNOBYL

TODAY IS THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF THE WORLD'S WORST NUCLEAR ACCIDENT -- CHERNOBYL. OUR LONDON CORRESPONDENT REPORTS ON THE LINGERING CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISASTER.

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LONDON, APRIL 26 (NCA/STUART PARROTT) -- SOVIET PRESS REPORTS SUGGEST THE AUTHORITIES UNDERESTIMATED THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE ACCIDENT AT THE CHERNOBYL POWER PLANT ON APRIL 26, 1986, WHICH KILLED A REPORTED 31 PEOPLE AND SPEWED RADIOACTIVITY ACROSS EUROPE.

RECENT REPORTS SPEAK OF CONTAMINATION TO LARGE AREAS OF THE UKRAINE AND BYELORUSSIA, PROBLEMS WITH FARMING AND THE FOOD CHAIN, THE EVACUATION OF MORE VILLAGES BECAUSE OF PERSISTENTLY HIGH RADIATION, AND HEALTH PROBLEMS ATTRIBUTED TO RADIATION EXPOSURE.

THE REPORTS REFLECT THE GREATER OPENNESS OF SOVIET REPORTING ON CHERNOBYL. BUT, EVEN TODAY, REPORTS ON CHERNOBYL ARE CONTRADICTORY. A SIGN OF CONTINUING SOVIET SENSITIVITY ON THE ISSUE CAME EARLIER THIS MONTH WHEN A SOVIET FILM DIRECTOR COMPLAINED HE HAD BEEN FORCED TO MAKE CUTS IN HIS FILM ABOUT THE ACCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH.

THE SOVIET MEDIA HAVE MADE NO SECRET OF THE FACT THAT PROBLEMS BEING ENCOUNTERED BY THE AUTHORITIES ARE AWESOME. THE REPORTS ALSO SUGGEST, THREE YEARS ON, THAT SOME SOVIET CITIZENS ARE STILL BEING EXPOSED TO UNACCEPTABLY HIGH LEVELS OF RADIATION.

A MAJOR PROBLEM IS THE CRIPPLED NUMBER 4 REACTOR WHICH IS ENTOMBED IN A GIANT CONCRETE SARCOPHAGUS. ORIGINALLY, PRAVDA SAID THE REACTOR COULD BE ENTOMBED FOR "CENTURIES" BUT TASS SAID LAST DECEMBER THAT THE SARCOPHAGUS WOULD LAST ONLY 30 YEARS.

SINCE MUCH RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL IN THE REACTOR WILL BE DANGEROUS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, SOME OTHER SOLUTION WILL HAVE TO BE FOUND. ONE OPTION IS TO BURY THE REACTOR UNDER A MOUND OF EARTH. ANOTHER IS TO RETRIEVE THE RADIOACTIVE FUEL AND REBURY IT IN A SPECIAL SITE.

THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT CONFIRMED LAST WEEK THAT IT HAD ABANDONED THE CONSTRUCTION OF TWO NEW REACTORS AT THE UKRAINIAN PLANT.

A SECOND MAJOR PROBLEM IS SERIOUS CONTAMINATION OF THE 30-KM ZONE AROUND THE CHERNOBYL PLANT. IZVESTIYA SAID RECENTLY THAT NORMAL LIFE WITHIN THIS ZONE WILL REMAIN "REMAIN IMPOSSIBLE FOR MANY DECADES."

IZVESTIYA SUGGESTED THE CLEAN-UP OPERATION HAS HIT SNAGS. IT SAID 150,000 CUBIC METRES OF DECONTAMINATED EARTH HAS BEEN CARTED AWAY FROM THE TOWN ADJOINING THE PLANT, AND THAT HOUSES HAVE REPEATEDLY BEEN WASHED BUT "NOT ALL OF THEM YIELD TO FULL DECONTAMINATION."

A NEW UNOFFICIAL GROUP IN THE BALTIC, THE ESTONIAN CHERNOBYL COMMITTEE, REPORTED THIS WEEK THAT CONSCRIPTS SENT TO CLEAN UP THE SITE ARE STILL BEING KEPT IN THE DARK ABOUT RADIOACTIVITY LEVELS.

ACCORDING TO A STUDY QUOTED BY PRAVDA LAST MONTH, AN ESTIMATED 230,000 PEOPLE WERE LIVING IN AREAS WHERE CONTAMINATION WAS ABOVE PERMITTED LEVELS. ANOTHER REPORT ESTIMATED THAT ALMOST ONE FIFTH OF BYELORUSSIA IS CONTAMINATED TO VARYING DEGREES. SOVIET AUTHORITIES RECENTLY ORDERED THE EVACUATION OF 25 VILLAGES IN BYELORUSSIA.

THE MAIN PROBLEM IS FALL-OUT FROM RADIOACTIVE CAESIUM-137 WHICH IS LIKELY TO REMAIN A PROBLEM WELL INTO THE NEXT CENTURY.

REPORTS HAVE SPOKEN OF CAESIUM CONTAMINATION OF THE FOOD CHAIN. A SOVIET JOURNALIST WHO VISITED THE DISASTER ZONE RECENTLY SAID SOME VILLAGERS APPEARED TO BE EATING CONTAMINATED FOOD AND THAT MILK WAS UNSAFE.

HE SAID A HEATED DEBATE WAS GOING ON OVER A PROPOSAL TO REPLACE THE TOPSOIL IN THE AREA BUT IT WAS FEARED THE COST OF TRANSPORTING MILLIONS OF CUBIC METRES OF SOIL COULD BE PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE.

A TASS REPORT SPOKE OF PLANS TO BUILD A SPECIAL PLANT TO PROCESS RADIOACTIVE PRODUCTS REMOVED BY DECONTAMINATION TEAMS. A SENIOR SOVIET OFFICIAL SAID LAST MONTH: "NO-ONE IN THE WORLD HAS EXPERIENCE OF DEALING WITH SUCH AMOUNTS OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE OF THIS TYPE."

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B-WIRE

26-APR-89 13:42

USSR -- (1) THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY OF CHERNOBYL

IN FEBRUARY, MOSCOW NEWS SAID THE NUMBER OF DEFORMED PIGS AND COWS BORN AT A FARM ABOUT 50 KMS FROM CHERNOBYL HAD SOARED. BUT EARLIER THIS MONTH, NIKOLAI LOSHILOV, THE DIRECTOR OF THE UKRAINIAN BRANCH OF A SOVIET RADIOLOGY INSTITUTE, SAID THAT ABNORMALITIES IN PIGS AT FARMS NEAR CHERNOBYL WERE NOT CONNECTED WITH RADIATION BUT WERE MORE LIKELY THE RESULT OF POOR BREEDING, LACK OF MINERALS IN FEED AND FODDER POISONED WITH TOXIC ELEMENTS.

MEANWHILE, A DEBATE IS STILL GOING ON ABOUT HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE LIKELY TO CONTRACT CANCER AND OTHER FATAL DISEASES AS A RESULT OF EXPOSURE TO RADIATION. THE UKRAINIAN HEALTH MINISTRY REPORTED LAST MONTH THAT MEDICAL CHECKS ON PEOPLE WHO RECEIVED THE LARGEST RADIATION DOSES HAD SHOWN NO INCREASE IN RADIATION-RELATED CANCERS OR BLOOD DISEASES.

WESTERN EXPERTS SAY CANCERS MAY NOT DEVELOP FOR AS LONG AS 30 TO 40 YEARS AFTER EXPOSURE TO RADIATION, THOUGH ONE FORM OF CANCER, LEUKAEMIA, USUALLY DEVELOPS WITHIN TWO TO FIVE YEARS AFTER EXPOSURE.

ONE DEVELOPMENT WENT LARGELY UNNOTICED IN NOVEMBER WHEN A SOVIET DOCTOR SAID MOST OF THE 13 SOVIET CITIZENS WHO HAD BONE MARROW TRANSPLANTS AFTER THE ACCIDENT ARE NOW DEAD. THE OPERATIONS WERE PERFORMED WITH THE HELP OF A U.S. SURGEON, DR ROBERT GALE.

BUT A NEW STUDY BY AMERICAN EXPERTS SUGGESTS THE HEALTH RISKS OF CHERNOBYL HAVE BEEN OVER-STATE. THE STUDY SAYS IF THE 1986 ACCIDENT RESULTS IN ANY INCREASED HEALTH RISK OUTSIDE THE IMMEDIATE VICINITY OF THE STRICKEN PLANT, THE EFFECT WILL FOREVER BE TOO SMALL TO BE DETECTED BY STATISTICAL METHODS.

ONE CASUALTY OF THE ACCIDENT HAS BEEN THE SOVIET UNION'S AMBITIOUS PLAN TO RELY ON NUCLEAR POWER FOR A MAJOR SHARE OF ENERGY REQUIREMENTS.

THE SOVIET UNION SAYS IT HAS ABANDONED CONSTRUCTION OF SIX NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS BECAUSE OF TOUGHER REGULATIONS IMPOSED AFTER CHERNOBYL AND BECAUSE OF EARTHQUAKE FEARS. THERE HAS BEEN INCREASING PUBLIC OPPOSITION BOTH TO THE BUILDING OF NEW PLANTS AND TO THE CONTINUED OPERATION OF EXISTING PLANTS.

DESPITE THE OPPOSITION, SOVIET OFFICIALS CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN THAT THE SOVIET UNION MUST CONTINUE TO DEPEND ON NUCLEAR POWER.

JUST YESTERDAY BORIS SEMENOV, A RANKING OFFICIAL OF THE STATE COMMITTEE FOR THE USE OF ATOMIC ENERGY AND A DEPUTY DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY, SAID IN VIENNA THE SOVIET UNION HOPES TO TRIPLE PRODUCTION FROM NUCLEAR POWER BY THE END OF THE CENTURY.

HE SAID THE AUTHORITIES HAVE DECIDED TO BUILD NO MORE RBMK REACTORS -- THE KIND THAT BLEW UP AT CHERNOBYL -- BUT THOSE ALREADY BUILT OR NEAR COMPLETION WILL APPARENTLY STAY ON LINE.

SEMENOV SAID IMPROVED SAFETY MEASURES HAD BEEN INTRODUCED AT SOVIET REACTORS. AND HE SAID HE WAS SURE ANOTHER ACCIDENT LIKE THE ONE AT CHERNOBYL "COULD NOT POSSIBLY HAPPEN." TW