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B-WIRE

31-JUL-89 03:00

USSR - NEW TESTS FROM CHERNOBYL COULD LEAD TO EVACUATION OF 100,000

WASHINGTON, JULY 31 (SPECIAL) - THE FOLLOWING ARTICLE BY FRANCIS X. CLINES APPEARS TODAY IN THE NEW YORK TIMES:

MOSCOW - NEW ESTIMATES OF CONTAMINATION FROM THE CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR DISASTER COULD MEAN THAT 100,000 MORE PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO BE EVACUATED FROM THE AREA BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF LETHAL RADIATION, SAY LOCAL OFFICIALS WHO ARE PRESSING THE KREMLIN FOR MORE AID.

TESTS CONDUCTED BY SCIENTISTS IN BYELORUSSIA HAVE FOUND THAT DANGEROUS LEVELS OF RADIATION CONTINUE MORE THAN THREE YEARS AFTER THE ACCIDENT, IN VILLAGES MORE THAN 200 MILES FROM CHERNOBYL, A SOVIET NEWS REPORT SAID.

SUCH AN EVACUATION, IF APPROVED BY THE GOVERNMENT, WOULD MEAN A TWO-FOLD INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF RELOCATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1986 NUCLEAR REACTOR EXPLOSION AT THE CHERNOBYL PLANT, IN WHICH 31 PEOPLE WERE KILLED.

OFFICIALS OF THE NEIGHBORING BYELORUSSIAN REPUBLIC RAISED THE POSSIBILITY IN TURNING TO THE KREMLIN FOR AN ADDITIONAL \$16 BILLION IN DISASTER AID, SAID TASS, THE GOVERNMENT PRESS AGENCY.

THE TASS DISPATCH FROM MINSK, THE BYELORUSSIAN CAPITAL, WAS BRIEF. IT CLEARLY SUGGESTED THAT THE SCOPE OF CHERNOBYL'S THREAT TO PEOPLE LIVING IN THE AREA COULD PROVE FAR GREATER THAN THE GOVERNMENT HAS CONCEDED.

IT REPORTED THAT THE BYELORUSSIAN PARLIAMENT RECEIVED WARNINGS FROM SCIENTISTS THAT MORE PRUDENT MEASURES WOULD HAVE TO BE TAKEN TO RELOCATE VILLAGES OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS TO REDUCE THE RADIATION RISK TO INHABITANTS.

CHERNOBYL IS IN THE UKRAINE, CLOSE TO THE BORDER WITH BYELORUSSIA, AND MUCH OF THE RADIATION FROM THE ACCIDENT DRIFTED NORTHWARD INTO BYELORUSSIA.

THE TASS REPORT DID NOT DEAL WITH THE QUESTIONS OF WHETHER THOSE RESIDENTS SUFFERED SERIOUS RADIATION EXPOSURE IN THE THREE YEARS SINCE THE ACCIDENT OR WHY THE ADDITIONAL EVACUATIONS WOULD BE SCHEDULED OVER A FIVE-YEAR PERIOD.

THE ANXIETIES OF LIVING IN CHERNOBYL WERE DESCRIBED IN A LETTER SUNDAY IN THE GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPER IZVESTIA FROM 600 RESIDENTS, WHO COMPLAINED THAT THEY WERE NOT EVACUATED UNTIL A WEEK AFTER THE EXPLOSION AND ONLY WELL AFTER THE CATTLE HAD BEEN LED TO SAFETY.

THEY LISTED A DOZEN TOP PARTY OFFICIALS WHO SOON LEFT THE AREA, AND THEY DESCRIBED INSTANCES OF SUSPECTED RADIATION POISONING SUFFERED BY CHILDREN WHO ATE FOOD FROM LOCAL STORES.

"IT'S JUST TERRIFYING TO IMAGINE THAT IN 10 YEARS THEY'LL SUDDENLY TELL THAT WE SHOULDN'T HAVE LIVED HERE," THE RESIDENTS WROTE.

THE PROVINCIAL AND CENTRAL AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN DISPUTING THE RISKS AND COSTS OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT, AND THE NEW EVACUATION ESTIMATE FROM BYELORUSSIAN OFFICIALS IS THE MOST EXTENSIVE YET.

THE ACCIDENT HAS COST THE GOVERNMENT AN ESTIMATED \$12.8 BILLION, INCLUDING THE COST OF ENCASING THE RUPTURED REACTOR IN STEEL AND CONCRETE.

THE GOVERNMENT ISSUED CONFIDENT PREDICTIONS THAT HAZARDS POSED BY THE DISASTER WOULD BE CONTAINED. BUT TASS SAID THAT SCIENTISTS EMPLOYED BY THE BYELORUSSIAN REPUBLIC REPORTED TESTS SHOWING THAT EFFORTS HAVE FAILED "TO LOWER BACKGROUND RADIATION TO SAFE LEVELS" IN MORE THAN 100 VILLAGES IN THE BYELORUSSIAN REGIONS AROUND MOBILEV AND GOMEL.

SOME ARE AS FAR AS 200 MILES FROM THE SEALED REACTOR AT CHERNOBYL, WHERE THREE OTHER NUCLEAR REACTORS CONTINUE TO OPERATE.

"MANY PEOPLE HAVE ALREADY LEFT THEIR HOMES," TASS REPORTED.

"THE FATE OF 423 OTHER LOCALITIES IS TO BE DECIDED LATER AS THE SITUATION THERE REQUIRES ADDITIONAL STUDY." (PTO)

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USSR - (1) NEW TESTS FROM CHERNOBYL COULD LEAD TO EVACUATION ...

TASS SAID THE BYELORUSSIAN REPUBLIC'S PARLIAMENT RECEIVED AN INITIAL DRAFT PROPOSAL THAT 11,600 PEOPLE MUST BE MOVED, BUT THEN CONCLUDED ON THE BASIS OF TIGHTER STANDARDS OF BACKGROUND RADIATION APPLIED BY LOCAL SPECIALISTS THAT THE RELOCATION OF "MORE THAN 106,000" RESIDENTS WAS ADVISABLE.

IN THE EXPLOSION AND FIRE AT THE NUCLEAR PLANT, ON APRIL 26, 1986, 31 SOVIET CITIZENS DIED, MORE THAN 200 SUFFERED RADIATION SICKNESS AND EXPANSES OF LAND, CROPS AND ANIMALS WERE CONTAMINATED.

IN THE AFTERMATH, MORE THAN 115,000 PEOPLE FLED OR WERE RELOCATED FROM THE IMMEDIATE AREA IN THE UKRAINE, WITHIN 18 MILES OF THE PLANT, AND FROM ADJACENT AREAS OF BYELORUSSIA THAT ALSO WERE CONTAMINATED BY A RAIN OF RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL.

LAST YEAR, A TEAM OF AMERICAN EXPERTS CONCLUDED THAT THE HEALTH RISK BEYOND THE VICINITY OF CHERNOBYL WOULD REMAIN FAR TOO SMALL TO BE DETECTED STATISTICALLY AND WAS LESS ALARMING THAN ORIGINAL ESTIMATES.

THERE WAS NO REACTION FROM THE KREMLIN TO THE BYELORUSSIAN ESTIMATE.

VILLAGERS HAVE COMPLAINED FOR MONTHS THAT THE TRUE EXTENT OF THE DANGER WAS BEING DISCOUNTED BY THE GOVERNMENT AND THAT THE WORST-AFFECTED REGIONS WERE SUBJECT TO SKIMPY SCIENTIFIC MONITORING.

IN TURN, SOME MEDICAL WORKERS HAVE INSISTED THAT THE RISK WAS UNDER CONTROL BUT THAT LOCAL RESIDENTS WERE UNDULY ALARMED, A PHENOMENON THEY DESCRIBED AS "RADIOPHOBIA."

A SCORE OF ADDITIONAL BYELORUSSIAN VILLAGES WERE EVACUATED LAST WINTER AFTER LOCAL OFFICIALS CONCLUDED THAT HIGH RADIATION LEVELS WERE A THREAT TO RESIDENTS.

IN RECENT MONTHS, PROTEST STRIKES HAVE BEEN REPORTED AS RESIDENTS SEE NEWSPAPER REPORTS THAT MILK AND MEAT PERMITTED ON THE MARKET WERE FOUND TO BE CONTAMINATED.

LOCAL RESIDENTS HAVE BEEN DEMANDING THE DISTRIBUTION OF RADIATION MEASURING DEVICES, BUT THE AUTHORITIES HAVE REJECTED THE PROPOSAL, SAYING IT WOULD NEEDLESSLY FRIGHTEN RESIDENTS. KR/GG