

CHERNOBYL

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*Belorussia and Russia*

The lengthy article by Yurii Izrael published in *Pravda*, while to some extent an attempt at self-exoneration in the face of adverse criticism (from Yurii Shcherbak, Chairman of the Zelenyi svit ecological association in Ukraine, Ales' Adamovich, the outspoken deputy from Belorussia, and others), did reveal that the consequences of Chernobyl' fallout have been far more severe in Belorussia than elsewhere. A Western critic has pointed out that while Belorussia received a miniscule proportion of funds allocated for evacuations and decontamination, two-thirds of the fallout from the disaster landed on Belorussian territory.<sup>1</sup> Izrael's figures suggest that of the 1,670 square meters of territory contaminated with over 40 curies per square kilometer, 1,160 lay in Belorussia, 310 in the RSFSR, and 200 in Ukraine, excluding the zone already evacuated (inclusion would render Ukraine the second worst affected area). The map published with Izrael's article shows that the fallout zone in the Belorussian republic extended not merely north of Gomel', but almost as far north as the city of Mogilev, dispelling earlier conclusions that only the republic's southern territory was affected.<sup>2</sup>

A particularly problematic area has been the forests of the southern part of Gomel' Oblast, especially around Khoyniki, and in mid-1988, the Belorussian Academy of Sciences and the State Committee for Hydrometeorology of the republic declared some 142,000 hectares as a "radioactive reserve." It is estimated that half of the radioactive fallout in this area fell into the woodland. Already there have been noted changes in leaf sizes and fauna, high levels of radioactivity in hedgehogs, birds that live near water, and also in animals that migrate into areas well away from the zone of major contamination, such as foxes and hares. However, according to a local official, the more that time has passed since the Chernobyl' accident, the less concern officials have shown for human suffering that is occurring in the Belorussian republic.<sup>3</sup>

One area of Mogilev, it was reported, was located 200 miles from the Chernobyl' plant, but had to be completely resettled in summer 1987. The average level of cesium-137 was 146 curies per square kilometer, and in a local pond, the instruments registered an astonishing 3,000 curies. However, there are many other areas with less spectacular but still dangerous levels of contamination that are not being resettled. In 1990, some 3,000 families in the Mogilev region have had to be resettled. In an area with a population of 2.2 million people, it is claimed, 20 percent have

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been seriously affected by Chernobyl, and the republic is in need of 8 billion rubles merely to preserve the health of the population in affected regions. The population is said to be increasingly bitter; a long (and uncorroborated) list of casualties from irradiation is being drawn up in Belorussia.<sup>4</sup> A case might be made therefore for Chernobyl' as, first and foremost, a Belorussian tragedy, but generally speaking the nature of the problem has yet to penetrate the world media.

As for the Russian Republic, a total of 8,130 square kilometers today have a cesium content of more than five curies per square km. Doguzhiyev, who has headed a group of experts reexamining the effects of radiation, cited the Bryansk region as the only contaminated region of Belorussia. Deputy V. Samarin, however, pointed out that the maps now available showed that Kalush, Orlov, Tula and Kursk regions should also be added to the "radioactive map." He also maintained that in these areas, sicknesses caused by radioiodine to the thyroid gland had risen by up to five times among the population generally, and by 8-12 times among children.<sup>5</sup> Some thirty-one villages in the Russian Republic are to be evacuated in the near future, but this would appear to address only the periphery of the problem.

#### *New Program to Eliminate the Consequences of Chernobyl*

The new "united" program to eliminate the consequences of Chernobyl' was published in late April 1990 by the USSR Supreme Soviet, which in its preamble noted that existing measures had been "inadequate" and that there was a need to develop a program based on longterm cooperation between the central government and those of Belorussia, Ukraine and Russia. Tens of thousands of people, it was stated, are today living in contaminated regions, and they required both clean food and medical attention. Therefore the Supreme Soviet issued a six-point program in order to "liquidate the consequences" of the accident in 1991-92, and to resettle families, especially those with pregnant women and schoolchildren, using funds from the all-Union budget.<sup>6</sup> The plan is to come into force late in 1990 and a law on the "Chernobyl' catastrophe is to be presented to the USSR Supreme Soviet in the last quarter of 1990. There are five basic problems to be considered:

1. Improvement of medical services in affected regions, especially for very young and schoolage children.
2. The development of "sorption" methods of preventive medicine and dietary methods of removing radionuclides from the organism.
3. The development of new approaches to reduce radioactivity in areas and to prevent the spread of radionuclides to new regions.
4. The development of a unified governmental system of benefits and compensation for those affected by and living in the zones of the Chernobyl' accident, as well as those involved in the decontamination process. A state register is to be

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compiled of these people.7

5. The creation of a unified system of radioecological information which will report on radiation levels to the general public. All secrecy on this question must be abolished.

Other major points in the Program related to the need to take the nuclear plant out of commission and to establish a "Children of Chernobyl" program by September 1990. In 1991, maps are to be drawn up that will indicate the exact extent of the affected region.

#### *An Uncertain Future*

While one can hardly avoid the conclusion that many of the problems caused by Chernobyl' today arose from official secrecy at the outset, especially the classification of important medical and radiation information (by the Third Department of the USSR Ministry of Health), it also seems evident that--as revealed by the All-Union scientific-technical meeting--some of the "old-style" thinking on this question remains in place. While one scientist speaks of returning evacuees to the thirty-kilometer zone, reports demonstrate that areas as far east as Kursk are suffering from Chernobyl' fallout. Officials to some extent are in a quandary of trying to justify past optimism and statements that are being thrown back at them by irate spokespersons today. The result is a muddled approach. Also, as revealed in the case of the Pripyat Industrial and Research Association, another matter is one of control: who is really running the evacuation zone today. Who decides whether a settlement or a raion must be evacuated? Originally the chain of command was clear, and the final decision was made in Moscow; today the question is more uncertain.

Finally, the sheer scale of the Chernobyl' tragedy is only now becoming apparent, but it is very unlikely that the full picture has been made clear. Five years after the event, the Soviet public has been promised maps that show the full picture of radioactive fallout. But there is no complete register of the estimated 600,000 persons who have participated in the cleanup campaign, or of the volunteers from Georgia to the Sakhalin Island, who took part in the very critical first thirty days of decontamination work and then returned home. It is arguable also that insofar as consumption of contaminated food and milk is concerned, the damage to the population--especially in Belorussia--has already been done. In the West, scientists have made prognoses about longterm cancer fallout based on incomplete and often totally erroneous data banks. In the Soviet Union, those who did possess somewhat more accurate information declined to disclose it. It is in this sense that Chernobyl' has become truly a world tragedy.

NOTES

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1. Zina Gimpelevich-Schwartzman, "Byelorussia: The Fourth Year After Chernobyl," paper presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Slavists, University of Victoria, June 1, 1990.
2. *Pravda*, April 17, 1990.
3. *Lesnaya promyshlennost'*, No. 12, January 27, 1990.
4. *Rabochaya trybuna*, April 26, 1990.
5. *Izvestiya*, April 26, 1990.
6. *Izvestiya*, April 27, 1990.
7. In itself, the inclusion of such a statement in the new program is tantamount to an admission that the original register of victims, compiled by the Center for Radiation Medicine in Kiev (under the jurisdiction of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR) is inadequate.

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