

USSR - THE TRUTH ABOUT CHERNOBYL  
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Since Chernobyl exploded, little has been known about the full effects of the disaster in the Soviet Union. It is a human horror that the Russians, with their talk of a little local difficulty, could not keep under the politburo carpet. Now, The Sunday Times is publishing for the first time the truth about the suffering

FOR Chernobyl's children, like the children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nightmare grows worse with the years. Radiation is insidious. It does not kill instantly but builds up in the bodies of its victims.

The most fortunate are often the ones who have been massively exposed and die within days or weeks. For the others, the infection is acquired at their mother's breast, from the meat, the bread and the vegetables they eat, from the ground beneath their feet and from the air around them.

Four years after the terrible accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant, the truth is at last coming out. Today, hospitals in the Ukraine, Belorussia and adjacent provinces of Great Russia are filled with victims. Whole wards are lined with gaunt, dying and deformed children. Their numbers - 10 to 15 times higher than before the accident - far exceed anything that could be explained by natural calamity.

The truth is that the Chernobyl disaster was not a localised problem, as the Soviet authorities have long insisted, but a huge human tragedy, spread by clouds of radioactive dust that fell to earth far away from the scene of the accident, among communities who were left to rot in ignorance of the poison enveloping them.

Now, as the children blighted by these death clouds emerge from the shadows - and their parents scream for justice - the extent of the disaster can no longer be hidden, not even by the most diligent and determined Kremlin apparatchiks.

The desperate efforts of the politburo in 1986 to pretend that the disaster was a little local difficulty - efforts revealed yesterday to The Sunday Times by Boris Yeltsin, the former polit-

buro member - have come, ignominiously, to grief.

There is overwhelming evidence that the explosions and meltdown at Chernobyl, in April 1986, contributed heavily to effects that have shown up in the new generations: babies without limbs, others with lesser imperfections such as hare-lips; many more with leukaemia.

"Chernobyl Aids", a breakdown of the body's immune system brought on by radiation, also claims an increasing toll. Those who fall victim in this way to otherwise unrelated diseases, such as pneumonia, do not even make it into the statistics. Their deaths

go unrecorded in the Chernobyl file.

Last week, the Soviet authorities themselves acknowledged at last that they had on their hands a human disaster on a scale they could not cope with. They launched a telethon on Moscow television to raise money for the victims, and appealed for international help, talking of 800,000 children at risk from leukaemia.

It is difficult to convey the enormity of what has happened. But this Sunday Times special report, we believe, is the truth about Chernobyl, the result of investigations by photographers, doctors, scientists and others with access to the stricken areas.

SCIENTISTS believe that

the effects of nuclear contamination begin to show up in young children about four years after their initial exposure to radiation. So until now Soviet health officials have been able to deliver reassuring prognoses about the effects of Chernobyl. Little by little, the blandness of statistics is being replaced by the horror of disease.

That came home at a recent public meeting in Minsk, some 250 miles north of Chernobyl, where an official from the Soviet

health ministry read out a long list of reassuring statistics about the consequences of the nuclear accident. There was nothing to fear, he said: radiation doses outside the immediate vicinity of the burnt-out shell of the reactor were well below dangerous limits. And there was little danger to children.

It was too much for the audience. A young woman stood up and shrieked: "How do you explain the fact that in my village alone 30 babies were born this

year with serious deformities?" A hullabaloo followed. One person claimed that only half that number had been born. Another said it was 29. But the woman held a trump card: 30 photographs of 30 deformed children.

"We were told there was nothing to worry about," said one furious man at the meeting. "But now our children are getting unwell. We were told that within a year we'd be picking mushrooms again, but we're not."

It is difficult for outsiders to penetrate the stricken areas, just as it is difficult for the people to get out to complain. But Monsignor Alexander Nadson, a Belorussian based in London who is Pope John Paul's apostolic visitor for Belorussians, travelled there last month with a consignment of aid. He visited several hospitals and spoke to a number of doctors and scientists, as well as victims of the meltdown.

Children, he found, are dying in overcrowded conditions for want of the most basic equipment. There are no ultrasonic scanners in the whole of Minsk, he says

- essential in the diagnosis and treatment of leukaemia - and no intensive care units for patients requiring round-the-clock attention. In many cases, there were not even medicines for pain relief.

Most harrowing of all, perhaps, is a standing directive from the higher medical authorities: no treatment whatsoever is to be given to terminal cases; children are to be left to die frightened and in agony.

Nadson says it is not only in the hospitals that these grave shortage problems arise. "There is not enough food in the homes. There is so much contamination of crops and animals that everything has to be brought in from the outside. There are shortages everywhere, and the lack of a proper diet has weakened children's resistance. Their immunity to simple diseases simply fades away. It is not 'Chernobyl Aids' that kills them, it is the lack of proper food."

People in the affected areas try to carry on their

normal lives, but Nadson believes that fear of radiation has now become an obsession. "People are very much afraid, and they have lost all trust in the authorities."

Doctors and nursing staff are doing what they can. But they are struggling not only with a bureaucracy that even now prefers to think the worst is over, but also with a lack of advanced treatment facilities and basic medicines without which a cure is frequently impossible. The success rate for the treatment of leukaemia, which in the West can be as high as 80%, is as low as 15%. Children and babies are even dying of a simple lack of vitamins, according to doctors in the area.

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Vladimir Sichov, who took some of the photographs on these pages, said: "In one village I visited everyone had been evacuated. But, incredibly, the children return each day from their new homes to attend school because their new village has no kindergarten. Some villages are

half clean and half contaminated.

"In Bragin, north of Chernobyl, where the radioactivity was intense after the accident, some villagers go out each day from 'clean' houses to work in contaminated fields. The soil all around is sandy and retains the contamination. It blows in the wind and moves from place to place. You can never know where is safe and where is not. One train I saw had just returned to the region full of seriously contaminated meat. Nobody anywhere would agree to deal with it and so it was brought back to Belorussia. I don't know what they are going to do with it."

Marko Bojcun, a science writer of Ukrainian origin now living in Britain, went last month to Pripyat, the former dormitory town for power-station workers five miles north of the Chernobyl plant. He said: "The soil had been removed three times and new concrete paths had been laid. All the trees were gone. Officials assured us that the area was now safe. But when I switched on my Geiger counter and took readings, the needle shot to the highest levels I had ever recorded."

WHEN the Chernobyl accident occurred, on April 26, 1986, during a test shutdown of reactor number one which went horrifically wrong, a vast radioactive cloud was released from the stricken core which, over a period of days, was to envelop much of the northwest Soviet Union before proceeding into Scandinavia and beyond. Because of the prevailing wind, blowing north and west, the worst effects were to be felt across an area between Chernobyl and the eastern provinces, or *oblasti*, of Belorussia. Here, the dark cloud settled thickly and began raining

its contamination on the land.

Many Belorussians firmly believe that the cloud was seeded to produce rain — or, as they say, "shot down" — before it could change direction and move east. They believe that they were sacrificed to save Moscow. (Yury Izrael, the head of the All-Union Hydrometeorological Committee, has publicly denied this charge.)

Once released, especially over the oblasts of Gomel and Mogilev, the radiation was quickly absorbed into soil and plants, and drifted through doors and windows into the homes of unsuspecting inhabitants. For several days, nobody in these nuclear killing fields knew what was happening. Nobody had told them. The Kremlin kept its own grim counsel.

The Chernobyl accident was quickly admitted to by Moscow, which won international praise for its frankness. But the scale of the human disaster was covered up, according to Boris Yeltsin, who was at the time a non-voting member of the Politburo. "I know a cover-up took place," he said in London on Friday, "because I watched it happening."

The consequences of this decision to remain silent were incalculable. It meant that many children in the affected areas were left exposed to radiation without even preventive medical treatment. Neutral iodine, which helps block the intake of radioactive iodine into the thyroid, was not distributed in Belorussia or the Ukraine until a week after the accident. In the neighbouring Russian provinces, the delay was two months.

During the succeeding weeks and months, according to figures released last May in Kiev and reported in the medical journal, *Klinicheskaya Meditsina*, some 600,000 people were "significantly exposed" to radiation.

It has now been estimated by Soviet doctors that approximately 160,000 children (up to seven years of age) of the 250,000

children living in contaminated areas of the Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia suffered levels of irradiation high enough to give them cancer of the thyroid. Twelve thousand of them were exposed to very high levels of thyroid irradiation from drinking contaminated milk and breathing in Chernobyl's plume because they were not evacuated in time from the 30-kilometre zone.

As many as 2m Belorussians — one fifth of the republic's population — could be affected but remain stranded to this day in an area of staggering high risk. Thousands more in the Ukraine and Russia, even in Moscow itself, have developed symptoms. The sickness is invisibly borne by food and water and by the wind.

And food is still coming from contaminated territory. The impression originally created by Soviet officials was of a neatly demarcated 30-kilometre zone, circular in shape, beyond whose borders it is safe to live. Later, it became clear that radioactive fallout from the ruptured reactor was spread in an irregular pattern, with hotspots up to 80 kilometres from the station. Protective clothing and other safety measures were ordered for farming communities living on territory adjacent to the 30-kilometre zone.

These still unevacuated regions have been producing contaminated food ever since. Soviet health officials stressed repeatedly in 1986 and 1987 that no contaminated food would get into the trade network and be sold to the public. But because the government was not prepared to acknowledge until early this year that such districts as Narodichi, in Kiev province, were contaminated enough to require evacuation, they would not tell their residents that the food they grew was contaminated as well. Not only were people eating the contaminated food they grew, Soviet trade officials collected and distributed it in Moscow, Kazakhstan and elsewhere in an effort to spread the risk among the Soviet population as a whole.

UNTIL recently, officials in Moscow still described the entire Chernobyl fiasco as a limited disaster which could be cleared up without fuss in the near future. A line 30 kilometres around Chernobyl was described on a map, as though it were an impassable *cordon sanitaire*. Inside the circle, the Russian policy in the face of the enemy was, as ever, scorched earth. People were cleared, livestock destroyed, trees felled, villages abandoned or burnt. Outside, the great pretence of normality was established early and maintained, against all logic, until finally broken by the combined forces of truth.

Asked last month what his assessment of the "radiation situation" in the country was, the deputy chairman of the national radiation safety commission said sublimely: "Satisfactory — the radiation poses less of a threat than the scare-mongering."

The full medical statistics of Chernobyl-related disease were made a state secret in the summer of

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1986, and remain so in spite of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost. According to activists of Rukh, the Ukrainian Popular Movement, doctors in Kiev have been issued with instructions on how to "lose" Chernobyl-related illness and deaths under more innocuous headings such as cancer or heart-failure. The division of the contaminated region between three of the 15 Soviet republics likewise helps to conceal the overall picture. Nevertheless, doctors and health workers are prepared, increasingly, to speak out. It is they who have made glasnost a reality.

Amidst the tragedy it is difficult, at first, to find redeeming features. The accident was man-made, and compounded by bungling. The subsequent cover-up, ironically masquerading under the nascent banner of glasnost, was cynical. The aftermath was either unforeseen or pre-emptively forgotten.

Yet there has, slowly and painfully, been change for the better. The heroes who gave their lives containing the nuclear inferno - firemen and soldiers who must have felt as though they were entering the gates of hell, and ended up among the official death toll of 31 - may not have died in vain.

Last week, the Kremlin's new view of the disaster was being spread by officials at every level of the Soviet bureaucracy. First, Moscow issued a declaration stating that "urgent measures" were needed to eliminate the consequences of the accident in what people call "the dirty territories". A new programme would be needed for the years 1990-92, and further programmes for the longer term, costed at 16 billion roubles, would be spent on a new clean-up and evacuation operation.

At the same time, a limited evacuation programme has been launched by Gorbachev himself to re-house thousands of children in other parts of the Soviet Union. The children were singled out in a presidential decree as the most vulnerable victims of the disaster. The programme, in public relations terms at least, appears to be sparing little

effort: even plush dachas in the Crimea, a luxury resort for the most privileged party officials, are opening their doors to pitiful peasant children from Belorussia and the Ukraine.

Officials have begun to admit, both at home and abroad, that the system which allowed Chernobyl to happen has got to be altered. Ordinary people, feeling both angry and

betrayed, have demanded that such a catastrophe should never be possible again.

The Kremlin is catching up a little late. Scientists outside the *nomenklatura* have persistently refused to be cowed about the causes of the accident and doctors have argued that something must urgently be done to enable better treatment to be offered to those in need.

IN 1986, at a post-accident review conference organised in Vienna by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Dr Leonid Ilyin, a vice-president of the Soviet academy of medical sciences, spoke in almost sanguine tones about the health risk to the 135,000 people evacuated from the 30-kilometre exclusion zone. The threat, he said, was "acceptable" - an increase in the cancer rate of about 0.6%, and a rise in the rate of birth defects of between 0.1% and 0.2%.

Four years on, doctors and environmentalists working on the aftermath of the disaster - as well as activists from the new Green movements and popular fronts - speak of a total of 3.5m people at risk. In southern Belorussia, pathological thyroid conditions are said to be observable in 50%-75% of children. Congenital defects and child mortality have risen significantly, and the only answer, according to the Belorussian Ecological Union, is total evacuation.

The fourth anniversary of Chernobyl has been marked not just by the Soviet Union's first charity telethon and by the announcement of a 16 billion rouble government aid package for the victims, but also by strikes and rallies in Belorussia and Ukraine, and by

calls for the impeachment of officials in power at the time of the disaster.

A popular movement called Chernobyl Aftermath has started to collate data for presentation to the authorities in Moscow. The

leaders of the movement declared at their opening meeting that more than 18% of the Belorussian countryside had been seriously contaminated in the fall-out, in an area that contains 2,697 villages and small communities, with a population of more than 2m.

One Western diplomat commented last week: "The Kremlin has looked very lame over the issue in comparison to local politicians in both Belorussia and the Ukraine. Local party officials have held big demonstrations and meetings in recent weeks which have won huge coverage in the press. Gorbachev could not sit by and do nothing."

The new mood, however belated, is palpable and widespread. Earlier this month, in the Polish city of Krakow, the international medical charity, *Medicins du Monde*, together with its Polish counterpart, *Lekarze Swiata*, hosted an East-West Europe meeting on the theme of Humanitarian Medicine and Human Rights. Four speakers from the Chernobyl area took part and appealed for help in trying to cope with the medical implications of the disaster.

"Chernobyl," said Dr Tamara Bialaokaja, a specialist in radiation medicine from Minsk, "is a problem for all humanity."

The doctors made it clear that considerable uncertainty persists about the effects of radiation. For massive doses, the picture is tragically clear. Those who were working at the Chernobyl plant at the time of the accident and those who went in afterwards as firefighters and rescue workers - many without protective clothing - were heavily irradiated, and most died. But little is known as yet about the effect of low-dose radiation.

All that has become clear is that there appears to be no "safe" minimum dose. They found that the prizes in this particular lottery are

cancer, leukaemia, and - most poignant of all - genetic damage to unborn children. Little is known, too, of the rate of uptake of radioactive isotopes by

plants, and hence through the food-chains into humans, nor of the rate at which such isotopes are eliminated from the body.

After the Chernobyl accident, leading Soviet doctors such as the academician Leonid Ilyin, stressed the unique opportunity it provided for follow-up studies on the affected areas. Little, however, was done. Lyuba Kovalevska, a journalist from the Chernobyl area (who, a month before the accident, published an exposé of alleged corner-cutting in construction work at the Chernobyl site), claims that health ministry officials in charge of such studies decided the information was "not of scientific interest" and promptly quashed the project. "Our medicine is political," Kovalevska laments.

What this lack of information means in practice was indicated in Krakow by Dr Tamara Bialaokaja, who works closely with a non-governmental "Children of Chernobyl" relief com-

mittee. Already, Dr Bialaokaja said, the incidence of tuberculosis in Belorussia is up 14%. Ruthenium - one of the contaminants released in the disaster - weakens the lungs and makes them more susceptible to infection. But the scientists had managed to get no information about the extent of this

contamination, nor about plutonium and other contaminants.

What the scientists do know is that immune deficiency - the lowering of the body's natural resistance to infection - is one of the first effects of exposure to radiation. It is with a sense of irony that people from the contami-

nated areas explain the nature of their Chernobyl Aids. It is like the Aids virus, they tell you. It makes you sick and the government does not want to know.

ONE thing Moscow evidently did not wish to know about was the extent of the contamination of the two Russian oblasts, or provinces, next door to Chernobyl. These two regions, as Boris Yeltsin confirmed, are in an even more perilous situation than the republics of Ukraine and Belorussia.

The disaster affected the two republics badly (in Belorussia 20% of the agricultural land and 15% of the forest is now unusable), and it has become a nationalist political issue in both of them. But for the vast Russian republic, extending across Siberia to the Pacific, contamination was only a peripheral problem and the people in the affected Russian provinces had been left to fend for themselves. Moscow did not care to admit that the holocaust was on its doorstep.

Dr Evgeny Blokhin, an environmentalist from the Institute of Agrochemicals

in Moscow, recalled in Krakow how it had been admitted "at once" that Belorussia and Ukraine were affected after Chernobyl, but that nothing was said about the Russian republic which, at its nearest point, is just 100 kilometres away.

"I had a lot of contact with the people there," he said, "and within a month of the accident they were very frightened. They were not told. They had to guess. The May day parades took place as usual, and a lot of people fainted. At the same time, sowing was going forward. Nobody knew what was happening. Burly peasants were collapsing in the fields."

The area was an ecological catastrophe, Blokhin claims. "Human life is no longer possible there. For a long time now, people have been told they could live there only by obeying special recommendations, but you can't do this in a normal life. If you follow these recommendations, serious psychological effects will follow."

Blokhin told the Krakow conference that he had personally measured the grass near Chernobyl in places where there was no deactivation. In November

1986, the level of radiation, expressed in the standard Soviet measure of x-ray and gamma ray emissions, was startlingly high. Today, he went on, outside the official disaster zone, there are areas of agricultural land with levels of radiation three times as high. Yet crops are still grown.

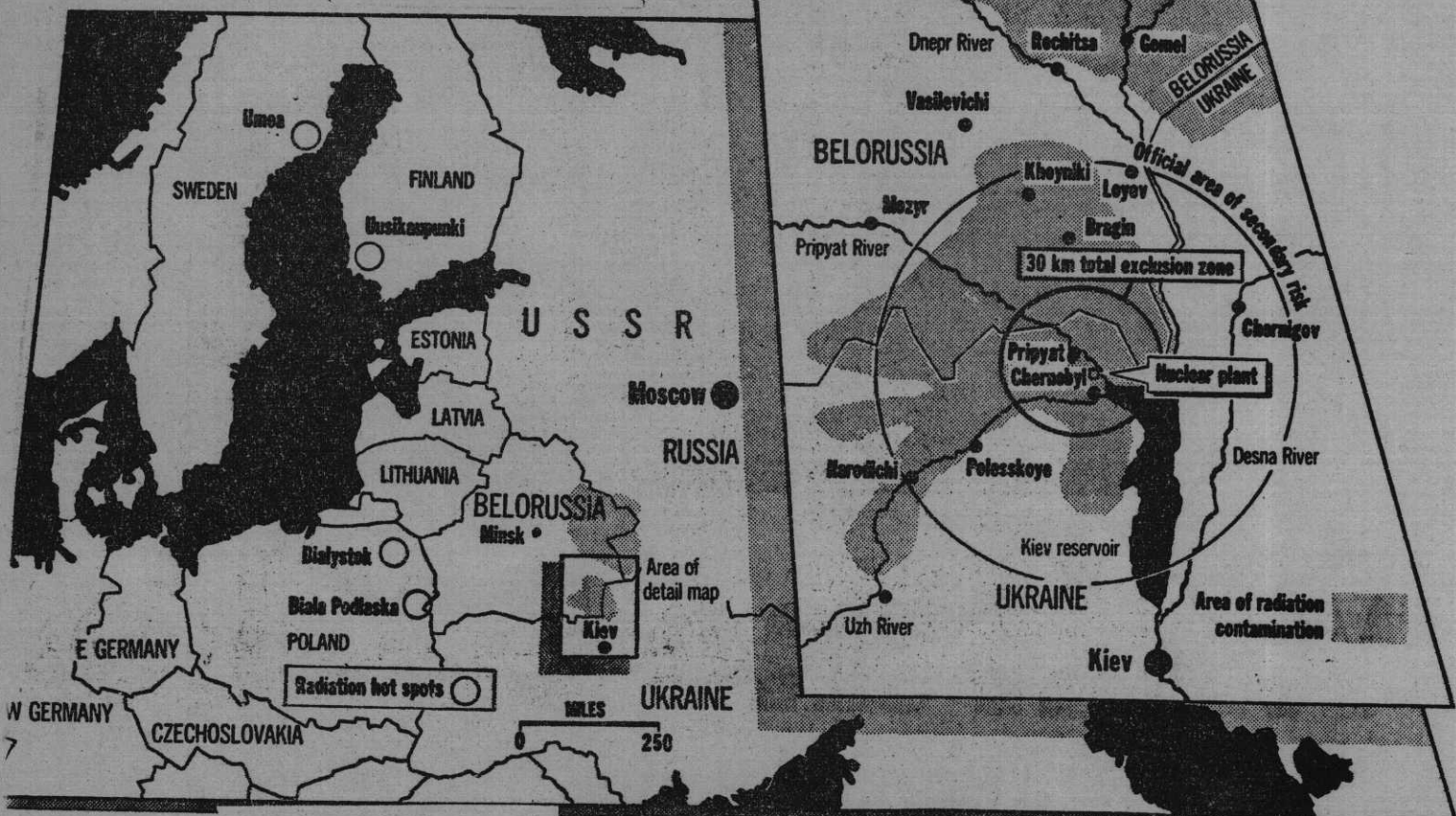
"Why do they grow crops there?" he asked. "There is no answer. It is a result of the concept of not losing the crops. They didn't want to move the people. The people have to live, they have to work and they are farmers - so let them grow crops, even if the crops cannot be used!"

It was terrible, he went on, to look at children who had no freedom to do what they wanted - to run or play in the fields. Many were confined to their homes, venturing out only to go to school along

carefully prepared "safe" walkways. Their physical condition was getting worse.

"The world must know that Belorussia is living a nuclear genocide," Professor Oleg Zhadiro, a radiobiologist from Minsk told colleagues in Krakow. Zhadiro had only one solution. He called for nothing less than the evacuation of the 2m people felt most to be at risk in the affected areas.

Even if it wished to act, the Kremlin simply does not possess the resources to accomplish such a massive relocation. Gorbachev admits that the public reassurances from the experts have been cruelly disproved by human experience but, with perestroika in crisis, he already operates at the limits of the possible and cannot conjure homes, jobs and medical facilities out of thin air. "They told us we'd be saved," said one man from the "dirty territory" in despair. "But we go on dying."



Graphic by Phil Green

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