

Chernobyl

FF057

B-WIRE

23-APR-1990 09:14:44

USSR - FOUR YEARS AFTER CHERNOBYL: THOUSANDS STILL LIVING A NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE - BY ANDREW KATELL

NOVIYE GROMYKI, U.S.S.R. (AP) - SMILING CHILDREN SKIP ALONG DIRT PATHS, KICKING UP RADIOACTIVE DUST. THEY THROW STONES IN THEIR RADIOACTIVE PLAYGROUND, THEN GO HOME FOR CONTAMINATED MEAT AND MILK. SINCE CESIUM, STRONTIUM AND PLUTONIUM DESCENDED ON THEIR ROOFTOPS, GARDENS, FARMS AND SCHOOLS FOUR YEARS AGO, THE PEOPLE OF THIS BYELORUSSIAN VILLAGE AND OF SCORES MORE IN THE UKRAINE AND RUSSIA HAVE BEEN PRISONERS OF CHERNOBYL.

THEY ARE SURROUNDED AND CONTINUOUSLY BOMBARDED BY AN ENEMY THEY CANNOT SEE, SMELL OR HEAR. THEY SAY THEIR GOVERNMENT AND THE WORLD HAVE ALL BUT FORGOTTEN THEM.

IN BARTOLOMEYEVKA, ANOTHER VILLAGE, A WARM AND HEARTY WOMAN NAMED TATIANA T. KHARSHUNOVA SAID: "THEY DID THIS TO US, AND WE HAD TO LIVE HERE. NOT JUST FOR A MONTH OR TWO BUT FOUR YEARS. NO ONE PAID ATTENTION TO US."

SHE AND HER NEIGHBORS GROW POTATOES AND BARLEY IN THEIR GARDENS, EVEN THOUGH THE RADIATION LEVEL IS 40 CURIES, NEARLY THREE TIMES THE DANGER LEVEL. THEY CAN RECITE THE FIGURES LIKE SCIENTISTS, BUT DO NOT SEEM FULLY AWARE OF THE THREAT.

"I'M AS STRONG AS A HORSE," IRINA Y. KOVOLEVA SAID. SHE LOOKED DOWN AT HER 14-MONTH-OLD GRANDSON IN HER ARMS AND ADDED: "HE'S STRONG, TOO."

THE BOY AND HIS PARENTS WERE SCHEDULED TO BE EVACUATED THE NEXT DAY.

"I'LL CRY WHEN THEY LEAVE," THE GRANDMOTHER SAID. "THE CEMETERY IS NEARBY, SO I'LL DIE AND GO THERE."

NADEZHDA N. DMITROCHENKO OF THE LOCAL GOVERNING COUNCIL SAID SHE TRIES TO EXPLAIN THE DANGERS OF RADIATION, BUT "PEOPLE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS IS. ... IT DOESN'T GLOW AND IT DOESN'T WHISTLE."

ON APRIL 26, 1986, AN EXPLOSION AND FIRE DESTROYED ONE OF FOUR REACTORS AT THE CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER PLANT IN THE UKRAINE, 125 MILES (200 KILOMETERS) SOUTHWEST OF NOVIYE GROMYKI.

AS THE CHILDREN OF THE VILLAGE PLAYED ON A SUNNY APRIL DAY FOUR YEARS LATER, CHICKENS AND CATS DARTED AMONG THE GREEN AND BROWN WOODEN HUTS.

THE ONLY SOUNDS WERE CHICKENS CLUCKING, DOGS BARKING AND THE DISTANT ROAR OF TRACTORS PLOWING CONTAMINATED FIELDS IN THE VAST, FERTILE PLAIN TRAVERSED BY A CREEK.

THE OFFICIAL DEATH TOLL FROM CHERNOBYL REMAINS AT 31, BUT A SOVIET NEWSPAPER SAID LAST FALL IT HAD RISEN TO 250. SCIENTISTS STILL PREDICT THOUSANDS OF DEATHS WILL BE TRACEABLE TO THE ACCIDENT.

AFTER YEARS OF PASSIVITY, THE PEOPLE AFFECTED ARE SPEAKING OUT. RESIDENTS OF GOMEL, THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL, PLAN A STRIKE AND DEMONSTRATION THURSDAY, THE ANNIVERSARY, TO PROTEST OFFICIAL HANDLING OF WHAT THE GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPER IZVESTIA CALLED "THE GREATEST TECHNOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE" IN WORLD HISTORY.

CITIZENS OF KIEV, THE UKRAINIAN CAPITAL 80 MILES (129 KILOMETERS) SOUTH OF CHERNOBYL, ALSO PLAN DEMONSTRATIONS. A TELETHON TO RAISE MONEY FOR VICTIMS IS SCHEDULED IN MOSCOW.

PROTESTERS DEMAND THAT OFFICIALS WHO CONCEALED THE EXTENT OF THE DANGER AND DELAYED EVACUATING CONTAMINATED AREAS BE BROUGHT TO TRIAL. THEY WANT MEDICAL CARE FOR VICTIMS AND SUPPLIES OF RADIATION-FREE FOOD.

ABOUT 70 PERCENT OF THE CHERNOBYL RADIATION FELL ON BYELORUSSIA AND CONTAMINATED ONE-FIFTH OF THE ARABLE LAND, AN AREA WHERE 2.2 MILLION PEOPLE LIVE.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE ACCIDENT, ABOUT 25,000 BYELORUSSIANS WERE EVACUATED, BUT ONLY LAST YEAR DID OFFICIALS ADMIT THE FULL SCOPE OF THE CONTAMINATION AND DECIDE TO RESETTLE 100,000 MORE. THE

USSR - (1) - FOUR YEARS AFTER CHERNOBYL: THOUSANDS...

THE PROGRAM APPEARS POORLY RUN. SOME EVACUEES ARE BEING RESETTLED ON LAND THAT ALSO IS CONTAMINATED AND THE GOVERNMENT IS BUILDING NEW HOMES, SCHOOLS AND OFFICES IN AREAS THAT ARE BEING EVACUATED.

MOST FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN HAVE BEEN MOVED OUT OF NOVIYE GROMYKI SINCE RESETTLEMENT BEGAN JAN. 1.

THOSE STILL WAITING FEEL ABANDONED AND FRIGHTENED. THEY CANNOT MOVE ON THEIR OWN BECAUSE HOUSING MUST BE FOUND FOR THEM.

"WE SIT AND CRY," SAID CLAUDIA A. KOSTOCHKA, 75, WHO WAS ON A BENCH WITH TWO OTHER WOMEN, SOBBING. "THEY WON'T TAKE US. WE'RE PENSIONERS."

"I LIVED ALMOST A WHOLE CENTURY HERE, RAISED A SON AND DAUGHTER HERE. TWO WEEKS AGO THEY CLOSED OUR STORE, SO WE'RE EATING CABBAGE AND CUCUMBER PRESERVES FROM LAST YEAR. WE DON'T KNOW WHETHER IT'S DANGEROUS OR NOT, BUT WE HAVE TO EAT."

A FARMER SAID THE MILK FROM HIS COWS WAS TOO RADIOACTIVE TO DRINK, SO HE SELLS IT TO THE GOVERNMENT, WHICH MAKES IT INTO BUTTER. HE SAID THE BUTTER WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SAFE.

MANY OTHERS INTERVIEWED SAID THEY DRANK THE MILK BECAUSE THERE WAS NO ALTERNATIVE. AS MANY MORE SAID THEY DID NOT BOTHER TO HAVE THEIR HOME PRODUCE CHECKED AT A LOCAL RADIATION LABORATORY.

SOIL AND DUST CARRY RADIOACTIVE PARTICLES.

THE ONLY PAVED SURFACES IN NOVIYE GROMYKI ARE ONE STREET AND THE GRADE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND AT NO. 13 LENIN STREET. WINDS BLOW DUST FROM THE DIRT ROADS AND FIELDS ONTO THE ASPHALT AND THE PEOPLE, AND INTO THEIR HOMES.

RESIDENTS ARE WARNED NOT TO GATHER FIREWOOD FROM THE HIGHLY RADIOACTIVE FORESTS NEARBY. BURNING IT MAKES THEIR STOVES INTO WHAT SPECIALISTS HAVE CALLED "MINI-REACTORS."

VILLAGERS ARE SUPPOSED TO WASH FREQUENTLY, BUT THEY ARE ALLOWED ONLY ONE BAR OF SOAP A MONTH, THE SAME AS ANYONE ELSE. SOAP IS RATIONED IN MOST OF THE COUNTRY.

EACH HOUSEHOLD GETS 30 RUBLES A MONTH FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO BUY UNCONTAMINATED FOOD, BUT IT IS HARD TO FIND. THIRTY RUBLES ARE WORTH 49 DOLLARS AT THE OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATE, BUT MUCH LESS IN REALITY.

IN VETKA, A FEW MILES (KILOMETERS) SOUTH OF NOVOYI GROMYKI, CHILDREN ARE FED "CLEAN" MEALS AT HIGH SCHOOL NO. 1 AND THE CRUMBLING CEMENT FLOORS ARE WASHED SEVERAL TIMES A DAY.

OUTSIDE, THEIR PROTECTION AGAINST RADIATION CONSISTS OF PAVED PLAYGROUND AND A CONCRETE BARRIER TO KEEP THEM OFF THE SIDEWALK WHERE CONTAMINATED DIRT FALLS FROM THE ROOF. STUDENTS ARE SUPPOSED TO RINSE THEIR SHOES IN A PAN OF WATER AT THE SCHOOL ENTRANCE, BUT MANY DON'T.

SEVERAL STUDENTS SAID THEY IGNORED WARNINGS AND RODE BIKES IN THE FOREST. THEY COMPLAINED OF HEADACHES AND EXHAUSTION, WHICH THEY BLAMED ON FALLOUT.

TO THE LIST OF AILMENTS THE CHERNOBYL GENERATION SUFFERS, SCHOOL PRINCIPAL NIKOLAI N. SHATILO ADDED BLOODY NOSES, SWOLLEN THYROID GLANDS AND VISION LOSS. THE RADIATION LEVEL AT HIGH SCHOOL NO. 1 IS TWO TO THREE TIMES NORMAL.

"WE CAN'T PROVIDE NORMAL CONDITIONS IN SCHOOL," HE SAID. "THERE'S ONLY ONE THING TO DO: TAKE THEM TO A CLEAN ZONE. WE MUST SAVE THE CHILDREN. THEY ARE OUR FUTURE."

ONE STUDENT SAID SHE WAS BITTER BECAUSE NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE, NOT EVEN THE DOCTORS WHO EXAMINE HER CLASS TWICE A YEAR.

A 16-YEAR-OLD BOY SAID: "WE'RE SICK AND TIRED OF ALL THE CHECKUPS. WHAT ARE THEY FOR? ALL THEY DO IS KEEP SAYING EVERYTHING'S NORMAL." EC/