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The big lie

The secret Chernobyl documents

In 1990, journalist Alla Yaroshinskaya came across secret documents about the Chernobyl catastrophe that revealed a massive cover−up operation and a calculated policy of disinformation. The state and party leadership had knowingly played down the extent of the contamination and offered a sanitized version to the outside world. In 1991, five years after the accident, a series of laws was adopted to protect the victims of radiation; now, scientists have begun to find serious flaws in these too. As recent studies show, the human and environmental damage shows no sign of abating.

Despite the changes brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev's vaunted *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the catastrophe at Chernobyl remained a classic Soviet cover−up, one that survived the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The number of people radically affected by the explosion was kept secret and the result was far greater mortality and suffering. Only in recent years have researchers and scientists begun to uncover the full truth of Chernobyl.

In the night of 25−26 April 1986, there was a catastrophic explosion in the fourth unit of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine. The reactor involved was of RBMK−1000 type and had been operating for three years. The effects of this accident will have profound effects on the ecology of the planet for many hundreds of years to come.

In spite of its expanding nuclear energy programme and nuclear weapons tests, the USSR was the only nuclear country in the world without its own nuclear safety laws. Other countries had adopted such laws early in the nuclear age −− France, for example, in 1945, the USA and the UK in 1946. At present, all developed countries have nuclear legislation.

A nuclear safety bill was drafted in the USSR two years before the Chernobyl accident but was never implemented, even after the accident, as a result of bureaucratic routine. There was no legal entitlement to compensation in spite of the dozens of accidents every year at military and civil nuclear installations; despite their frequency, these were kept secret, not only from the outside world, but also from Soviet citizens.

Under the Soviet system, it was quite natural that neither the government of the Soviet Union nor the local authorities were prepared to take legal responsibility for the ecological, social, and other problems caused by Chernobyl −− even though Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were already in place. However, the scale of the accident and the changes that had taken place in the society by that time made it impossible to conceal the

fact of the accident altogether; people in the affected territories repeatedly demanded the introduction of legislation to cover their health problems, ecological damage, and compensation for material losses arising from the accident.

In April 1990, the Supreme Soviet reviewed the situation concerning the consequences of the liquidation of the Chernobyl accident and noted:

> The accident at the Chernobyl NPP in its consequences is the gravest disaster of the present time, affecting destinies of millions of people residing in a vast territory. The ecological effect of the Chernobyl accident has made the country face the necessity of solving new, exceptionally complex, large−scale problems affecting virtually all spheres of social life, many aspects of science and manufacturing, culture, ethics, and morality.

The first attempts in the USSR to find legal settlement of the ecological and other problems caused by Chernobyl were bylaws adopted jointly by the Central Committee of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The first such document was their Decree adopted on 7 May 1986 −− 12 days after the accident −− "On terms of payment and material provision of employees of enterprises and organizations in the Chernobyl NPP zone".

Although the USSR had used nuclear energy for some decades, only now was a separate ministry of nuclear power established with legal responsibility for matters pertaining to the use of the "peaceful atom". Various other joint decrees on specific problems associated with the aftermath of the accident were likewise adopted in 1987−1988. However, it was only four years after the catastrophe, on 25 April 1990, that a decree "On a comprehensive programme to liquidate the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl NPP and the situation related to this accident" was directly adopted by the Supreme Soviet, the country's legislative body.

The decree also authorized a programme for 1991−92 of immediate measures to deal with the Chernobyl aftermath. It assigned the Council of Ministers the duty of drafting a "Law on the Chernobyl Catastrophe" and submitting it to the Supreme Soviet in the fourth quarter of 1990. This law was to define the legal status of the catastrophe victims, the participants in containment and clean−up operations, persons living and working in the affected areas, and those compulsorily resettled. It would also cover the "legal regime of the disaster area, discipline of population residence and activities, military service, formation and functioning of state administrative bodies, and public organizations in the affected area".

However, as the next relevant decree of the Supreme Soviet on 9 April 1991 noted: "There has been no possibility at present to adopt the Law on the Chernobyl Catastrophe and the Law on Nuclear Energy Use and Nuclear Safety due to the delay in submitting the drafts of these laws." Only in 1991, five years after the accident, were fully adequate legislative acts adopted, defining the responsibility of the government for the damage inflicted on citizens by a nuclear enterprise adopted in the USSR These were:

− the law of the Belarusian SSR: "On the Social Security of CitizensAffected by the Catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP"

(12 February 1991);
− the law of the Ukrainian SSR "On the Status and Social Security of Citizens Affected by the Accident at the Chernobyl NPP";
− the laws of the Russian Federation "On the Social Security of Citizens Affected by Radiation in Consequence of the Accident at the Chernobyl NPP" and "On the Social Security of Citizens Who Suffered in Consequence of the Chernobyl Catastrophe" (12 May 1991).

As the names indicate, these laws applied primarily to the affected population and only dealt indirectly with environmental problems. Compared to the legal vacuum of the previous five years, however, they were a significant step forward. This is all the more important as no one had ever faced such social and environmental problems before. Nuclear accidents in other countries, such as Three Mile Island in the US and Windscale in the UK, could not be compared to the far−reaching consequences of Chernobyl.

However, almost 20 years after the Chernobyl accident, scientists, specialists, and ecologists have begun to question the "Chernobyl" laws of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. A great many studies have exposed the current system of social−economic and medical measures to harsh criticism, particularly in respect to the calculations of the dose of radiation delivered to the population, which still constitute the basis for compensation and assistance.

Oksana Zitzer, a leading specialist on the State Committee on Environmental Problems of Russia, gives convincing reasons why these are wholly inadequate:

− The radiation risk of the population may vary considerably.
− Experience has shown that because of substantial variation in the dose received by individuals, the calculated average doses for specific areas are unreliable; the density of sampling should therefore be increased.
− In spite of long−term investigations by the Institute of Biophysics, the Institute of Radiation Hygiene, and other establishments of the Ministry of Health Care of the former USSR and Russia, the dosimetric and epidemiological data are insufficient to establish parameters for dose distribution, social−biological effects −− eg mortality rates −− differentiation of people's sensitivity to radiation, and so on.

The last factor −− the differentiation of people's sensitivity to radiation −− has a major impact on the total outcome of irradiation per region. The radiation−sensitive part of the population shows an extremely high population mortality.

It follows that the current "zonal" approach, which calculates contamination −− and individual dosage −− from the local density of radionuclide deposition is inadequate. For radionuclides migrate, are adsorbed, and undergo radioactive decay, sometimes into less dangerous elements but sometimes into considerably more hazardous ones.

The Russian Commission on Radiation Protection has adopted a "Concept of Radiation, Medical, and Social Security of the Population Exposed to Radiation Effects" on the basis of which, the Russian government has

recommended that its Chernobyl legislation should be revised. A "dose−based" approach will replace the current "area−based" one.

But how to do this in practice? And can it, indeed, be done at all? The difficulty relates to the early days after the accident, and to the "big lie" about the health of the population after Chernobyl.

It is well known that after the Chernobyl accident, the Soviet government immediately did everything possible to conceal the fact of the accident and its consequences for the population and the environment: it issued "top secret" instructions to classify all data on the accident, especially as regards the health of the affected population.

Then came instructions from the ministry of health and the ministry of defence to classify the radiation doses received by the general population, the "liquidators" (scientists and others involved in firefighting and containment work at the stricken power−station and in clean−up operations of the contaminated area immediately after the event) and military personnel. These regulations demanded that medical staff must not enter a diagnosis of "acute radiation syndrome" in the files of liquidators from the armed forces but must substitute some other term.

These classified documents were not accessible for many years. Only in 1991, when the Soviet Union was collapsing, was I able to get hold of secret protocols and other documents of the operative group of the Politburo. These minutes revealed the numbers of persons irradiated and hospitalized during the first days after the accident.

− The public health issue is first raised in the protocol of 4 May 1986:

> The report of Mr Schtepin [Soviet first deputy minister of health care] on the hospitalization and medical treatment of the population exposed to radiation. It is noted that by 4 May, a total of 1882 persons have been hospitalized. The total number examined reached 38 000 persons. 204 persons were diagnosed with radiation syndrome of varying seriousness. These include 64 children. 18 persons are in a critical state.

− Protocol of 6 May 1986:

> It is reported [...] by Mr Schtepin that as of 09.00 on 6 May the total number hospitalized is 3454: 2609 of them are in−patients, including 471 children. According to the updated information, the number of persons suffering acute radiation syndrome has reached 367, including 19 children; 34 of them are in a critical state. In Moscow Hospital No. 6m there are 179 persons receiving in−patient treatment, including 2 children.

The cynicism of the document is striking: "The proposal of the Ministry of Health Care of the USSR on publishing data on the number and condition of patients in Moscow Hospital No. 6 should be accepted, taking into account that there are US specialists working in this hospital." Had Americans not been there, nothing would have been known about the situation in Hospital No. 6.

− Protocol of 12 May 1986:

> It is reported by Mr Schtepin that during the past day, 2703 more persons have been hospitalized, mainly in Belarus. 678 persons have been discharged from hospitals. 10 198 persons are undergoing treatment and medical examination in hospitals.

So far, the number of sick had been increasing daily, but from 13 May, the number of hospital patients in the reports fell sharply, while the numbers of those discharged began to increase.

− Protocol of 13 May 1986:

> Make note that in the course of yesterday, 443 persons have been hospitalized, 908 persons have been discharged from hospitals. 9733 persons including 4200 children are undergoing treatment and medical examination in hospitals. Diagnosis of radiation syndrome has been established in 299 cases including 37 children.

Why did the process of discharging people from hospitals become so rapid after the number of patients had exceeded 10 000? The answer is hidden in the same documents.

− Protocol of 8 May 1986:

> [...] The ministry of health care has confirmed the new norms of acceptable radiation levels for members of the public as ten times the previous norms. Increase of these norms to levels 50 times higher than previously is permitted in specific cases [...] By these means the health safety of the public of all ages is guaranteed, even should the current radiation situation last for 25 years.

These norms applied even to children and pregnant women. In one stroke, the 10 000−plus people hospitalized because of exposure to radiation were automatically reclassified as "healthy" and discharged. The official number of people suffering from acute radiation syndrome also fell significantly. It goes without saying that Party bosses increased the acceptable dose in this way simply to hide the numbers affected. It was an effective ploy. However, as the process of democratic transformation took hold, the real extent of irradiation gradually emerged.

During hearings before the Supreme Soviet in 1990, Academician Ilyin, the director of the Institute of Biophysics, and one of those responsible for concealing the truth about the health situation in the affected areas, admitted under the pressure of deputies' inquiries that:

> 1.6 million children received radiation doses that are causing us concern; a decision should be taken on further action [...] If the dose limits were lowered to 7 rem[1] per 35 years [of life], we would have to increase the number of 166 000 people currently scheduled for resettlement by a factor of 10. The resettlement of 1.6 million people would have to be considered. Society must balance all the risks and gains of such an action.

It had become a matter of economics: the USSR could not afford to resettle so many people. The truth about the health of the population had to be concealed from the population itself.

The official medical documents from my own Chernobyl archive make it easy to chart the dynamics of change in the stance of the "godfathers" (LA Illyn, EI Chazov, and AK Guskova) of the Soviet concept that a person may receive 35 rem over 70 years.[2]

The first more or less open report, "Radio−contamination Patterns and Possible Health Consequences of the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station", was presented by Ilyin at the General Session of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR in Moscow on 21−23 March 1989. It uses the 35−rem concept and notes, particularly, that for the population of the strict control zones (SCZ):

> [...] estimations of late effects were based on the actual doses in the four years following the accident and on the projected doses until 2060, the latter calculated on the assumption that restrictions on the use of home−grown foodstuffs would be lifted in the SCZs.

But who and when had accurately evaluated the doses received by the population in the first two to three months? Officials in the Narodichi district of the Zhitomir region made every effort to eliminate the primary medical documents representing the actual doses: medical staff were ordered to register understated dose values. Hitherto secret official documents of the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR are similar. According to them, no autopsies of those who died after the accident, including children, were carried out in the SCZ in Zhitomir region. The authors of the above report make this astonishing forecast for the population of the SCZs:

> Despite the upward trend in spontaneous mortality and mortality due to malignant neoplasms, evident in data from all over the USSR, the values of these parameters are assumed to remain stable throughout the investigated 70 years' period. Hence, ratios of increase in the number of excess fatal tumours over their spontaneous level can only be corrected downwards [...] The data presented in this report provide evidence that the predicted levels of the radiogenic effects as a result of the accident at the Chernobyl NPP, in the majority of cases, including the population in the SCZs, are likely to lie in a range of values less than the standard deviation of spontaneous levels of the corresponding pathology.

In other words, the authors claim that among the population in the SCZs, who were exposed to irradiation every day, there will be less fatal cases of induced cancers than among the population of all other territories.

The results of studies conducted by scientists almost 20 years after the Chernobyl accident are strikingly different.

According to of the World Health Organization, the number of "liquidators" totals some 800 000. Russian scientists put the figure at approximately 600 000, but no one knows the precise number since "By order of the Ministry of

Health Care of the Ukrainian SSR, persons who took part in eliminating the consequences of the accident [only] after 1 January 1988 should not be included in the 1989 register".

Official Ukrainian figures state that 148 000 people died as a result of Chernobyl during the ten years following the catastrophe. The Russian Committee of Liquidators stated that 100 000 liquidators have died over the past two decades as a result of their work at and around Chernobyl. According to the data of The Chernobyl Union of Ukraine, 622 250 people have died during the same 20 years. The organization has a special calculator on its website, updated daily.

According to the reports of the ministry of health care of Belarus, the total mortality in the most contaminated areas of this country has increased by 51 per cent in comparison to the period before the Chernobyl accident.

A recent report of specialists of the Russian ministry of labour and the ministry of the environment, states that more than 500 000 children under 14 years are living in the Ukrainian territory affected by the catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP. It notes the alarming fact that 150 000 people received thyroid irradiation doses dozens or hundreds of times higher than the acceptable level.

Research results from the Clinical Institute of Radiation Medicine and Endocrinology in Minsk, Belarus, show a 40 per cent increase in cancer between 1990 and 2000. The incidence of child thyroid cancer has significantly increased. While only two or three cases of thyroid cancer were registered annually before 1986, 200 cases were registered in Ukraine in 1989 alone. The data of the European Association for Studies of the Thyroid Gland shows this number is only the beginning of the outbreak: in the next 30 years, thousands of children will suffer from thyroid cancer. The World Health Organisation confirmed in April 2000 that the Chernobyl disaster will cause 50 000 new cases of thyroid cancer among young people living in the worst−affected region. Its report predicted that the worst was still to come for more than 7 million people affected by the disaster.

"Chernobyl is a word we would all like to erase from our memory," said UN secretary general Kofi Annan in a foreword to the report. "But," he added, "more than 7 million of our fellow human beings do not have the luxury of forgetting. They are still suffering, every day, as a result of what happened." The exact number of Chernobyl victims may never be known, he said, but 3 million children require treatment and "many will die prematurely".

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[1] The rem (radiation−equivalent−man) is an old unit for measuring radiation risk (equivalent to 10 millisierverts in SI units). According to Publication 60 of the International Commission for Radiological Protection (1990), a dose of 1 rem carries a 1/2000 risk of developing a radiation−induced fatal cancer. Natural background radiation gives a dose of the order of 0.2−0.4 rem per year (slightly higher in granite areas). In the EU, the maximum annual additional dose of anthropogenic radiation for the general public is now 0.1 rem; at

the time of Chernobyl it was 0.5 rem. −− the same as in the Soviet Union.

[2] In fact, this dose rate appears to be identical with the permissible upper limit generally accepted internationally at the time. However, such rates were and are calculated on the assumption of low−level exposure −− eg x−rays, flights in high−altitude aircraft, etc −− not for a massive dose delivered over a relatively brief time as with Chernobyl.

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