



World Health Organization

**Welcome Address
by Susanne Weber-Mosdorf
Assistant Director General, WHO**

**Chernobyl 20th anniversary meeting
Kiev 24th April 2006**

On behalf of the Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr Lee Jong-wook, I would like to welcome you to this most important conference marking the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident.

In the past week the following image was described in a German newspaper feature story:

20 kilometres from the exploded reactor of Chernobyl, in a kindergarten, a gas mask is lying next to a doll. A pedal car has waited for 20 years to be driven again through the room by little feet.

Silhouettes of children have been sprayed on walls. A sign of a future that will never exist again. Nobody will live in Pripyat - at least not for centuries.

The Chernobyl accident on the 26th April 1986 was a devastating event, particularly for the people of Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation, but also for the rest of Europe. The shock affected people around the world.

The accident itself was traumatic. What followed - disease, death, relocation, insecurity, stigmatization and disruption of people's lives amplified the trauma.

Chernobyl was not only the most severe nuclear accident ever, it was also one of the biggest environmental disasters. "It has been estimated that the total radioactivity released from the reactor was 200 times that of the combined releases from the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki".

Soon after the accident, some 116,000 people were evacuated, and an additional 230,000 people were relocated from highly contaminated to other areas in subsequent years.

Relocation proved a deeply traumatic experience because of disruption to social networks and not being able to return to their homes. For many, there was a social stigma associated with being an "exposed person".

More than 5 million people live today in areas still contaminated with radioactive materials.

Many of these people have demonstrated higher anxiety levels, multiple unexplained physical symptoms and subjective poor health compared to non-exposed populations.

We often overlook the fact that the largest health impact, and the greatest challenge for WHO and the international community, is to improve the mental health of the survivors. Many people live with anxiety and hopelessness. We must remember those who died. But we must also focus on assisting the hundreds of thousands of people who are building a future.

Especially vulnerable are the children. In a report published this month, WHO shows that around 5000 people who were children and adolescents at the time of the accident, and living in the most affected countries, have developed thyroid cancer. While the prognosis for recovering is good, new thyroid cancer cases are likely to appear for decades to come.

WHO also estimates that the likely excess number of cancer deaths due to Chernobyl among the clean-up workers, evacuees and residents of the highly and lower-contaminated regions in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine could be up to 9,000. While there is much debate about the exact number of possible cancer fatalities, WHO has used only the highest quality science to produce its estimates. However, the uncertainty in these estimates is large,

and the exact numbers will never be known as it is currently impossible to tell which cancers were due to radiation exposure and which were due to other causes.

The UN Strategy for Recovery, launched in 2002, gave the UN agencies and the international community a framework for rebuilding the most-affected areas of Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation. The Chernobyl Forum that resulted from this Strategy, mandated WHO to review the health effects.

The resulting WHO report on the health effects of Chernobyl is designed to give the most affected countries, and their people, the information needed to help them understand and overcome the trauma associated with the accident and the lack of communication that followed.

We must never forget the victims of this terrible accident, and we pay tribute to those who lost their lives containing the radiation.

To avoid such an accident ever happening again, we must establish an improved global culture of safety, and be open and transparent about the risks.

Thank you for your kind attention

Susanne Weber-Mosdorf

ADG/SDE