

CHERNOBYL

ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

CHF 1,517,000
200,000 beneficiaries

Programme no 01.42/99

The Context

The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant explosion in April 1986 spread radioactive contamination over 120,000 square kilometres in Belarus, Ukraine and the Russian Federation, home to over four million people. About 400,000 people have been relocated. The rest, including 1,000,000 children, are still living in contaminated areas.

Nearly 13 years later, the effects of the accident are still being felt. They include a high incidence of thyroid gland cancer and other pathologies among children and adolescents. The situation is made worse by the

socio-economic crisis in all three countries that followed the break-up of the former Soviet Union, leading to plummeting standards of living and a drastic reduction in health and social welfare programmes.

The Operation

Red Cross medico-social assistance to the affected population started immediately after the accident and continues today.

In 1990 the Federation launched the Red Cross Chernobyl Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation Programme (CHARP). It concentrated at first on screening foodstuffs and the environment through radiometric testing. From 1992 onwards six mobile diagnostic laboratories (MDLs), based in six badly affected regions, screened background radiation and gave medical examinations to adults and children living in remote areas. They also distributed health information to the population on measures to avoid radioactive contamination. These activities are ongoing.

- New Phase of CHARP

In 1996, CHARP underwent certain modifications. Since the radiation situation had stabilised, the dosimetric part was reduced. Instead, because of the rising incidence of radiation-related thyroid gland cancer, mainly in children who were between 0 and two years old when the accident occurred, the number of people targeted for medical screening was increased from

60,000 to 90,000, with a special focus on children and people who were children at the moment of the accident. In June 1997, six new MDLs, redesigned to facilitate the increase in examinations, replaced the old ones. Three new MDLs now operate in Belarus, two in Ukraine and one in the Russian Federation. The early discovery of somatic and thyroid pathology, and particularly thyroid cancer, can save lives. At the same time, when MDL specialists discover diseases during examinations they immediately refer patients to specialised regional and republican medical institutions for further examination and treatment.

A new element of the revised CHARP is the introduction of a psycho-social support programme (PSS). This began as a pilot project in 1997 in Belarus, where Red Cross workers and volunteers trained in PSS helping techniques have assisted about 2,000 people living in contaminated areas of Belarus and people resettled in Minsk after the catastrophe.

The PSS programme created a core of "trainers" to spread psycho-social support tools via one-day workshops among Red Cross staff and social workers who can utilise these tools in their daily activities. These trained workers pass on their knowledge further, to those who can act as "messengers" – doctors, school teachers, social workers and Red Cross Visiting Nurses and community-based volunteers.

The central element of the PSS services is constituted by counselling sessions, either for individuals or groups. They seek to resolve crises, maintain emotional stability, promote an understanding of the reality of the disaster's consequences, identify participants' health and psychological state, develop coping strategies, and re-establish support from family, social and institutional networks. Similar assistance is provided by the doctors of MDLs operating in remote contaminated areas.

In late 1998 a large "Training of Trainers" Workshop was being organised in Ukraine to launch the programme there.

- Medical Screening

From 1994 to mid-1998 the Red Cross MDLs have medically screened 269,072 people – 112,805 adults (41.9%) and 156,267 children (58.1%). For most people in remote and radiation-polluted areas the screening was one of their rare health checks since the Chernobyl accident because of the critical limitations of governmental health care services. In Ukraine for instance, the MDLs are the only source of medical screening for people in rural areas and thus are filling an important gap.

The number of persons diagnosed with symptoms of one or more illnesses is mounting. From 1996 to 1997, it rose from 67,7% to 70,1%. The Red Cross MDLs have detected an increasing number of thyroid and other pathologies and in all regions there is a year-by-year growth in diseases of the respiratory, endocrine, nervous and blood circulation systems among the screened population.

- Distribution of Medicines and Multivitamins

Besides medical screening and psycho-social support, CHARP started to supply some medicaments in 1998, including "levothyroxine" which is used for the treatment of people with thyroid conditions. Patients operated for thyroid cancer need a lifetime hormone therapy, for which levothyroxine is irreplaceable. The local pharmaceutical industry does not produce this medicament.

The Red Cross Chernobyl Programme has also distributed more than 150 tons of milk powder and about 100 million tablets of multivitamins to children living in the contaminated areas of the six regions covered by CHARP. These annual distributions, begun three years ago, are carried out through schools and kindergartens.

An extended meeting of the International Chernobyl Co-ordinating Committee in March 1998 emphasised that CHARP would need to continue at least into the next decade. Some experts fear that thyroid gland pathologies may not yet have reached their peak. This makes it increasingly essential to reinforce health care in the Chernobyl affected countries through diagnosis and psychological support services.

Objectives of the Operation

- to give medical examinations to 90,000 people living in the most contaminated and remote areas, focusing on children and persons who were children at the time of the disaster; and to provide them with accurate and immediate information on their health and the health of their children, referring them for further care when necessary.
- to supply and distribute vitaminised milkpowder and multivitamins, complemented with stable iodine and micro-elements, to the 100,000 children living in the contaminated areas.
- to supply and distribute levothyroxine and other medicaments for people diagnosed with thyroid cancer and other serious pathologies.
- to continue educational activities on preventing radiation effects.

Psycho-Social Support

- to identify the psychological needs of the affected population and to respond to these needs among the most vulnerable by giving psychological support and relevant information.
- to continue coaching and upgrading the existing core of trainers and to create such cadres in other ONS in order to expand the PSS.
- to facilitate the dissemination of psycho-social support tools by trainers among Red Cross workers and community level volunteers.
- to prevent emotional burn-out among Red Cross workers by organising peer counselling and professional self-support groups with the help of trainers.
- to promote the financial sustainability of PSS activities.

- to strengthen psycho-social support capacities on a national scale by establishing close working relationships and co-ordination with other organisations/structures working in this field.

Plan of Action

- Medical Services

To enhance the efficiency of the MDLs and ensure they reach the target figure of 90,000 people screened, a workshop for MDL personnel and RC staff will be held in April and advanced training for MDLs personnel (doctors and technicians) will take place September-November; computer operators will be trained in the new software to be introduced shortly. A Red Cross Dispensary for punctual biopsy will be created in March-April in every Regional Red Cross Centre involved in CHARP and in September the MDLs will be resupplied with reagents and some medical equipment.

30 tons of milk powder for 60,000 children in contaminated areas and two million multivitamin tablets for 40,000 children will be supplied and distributed; medicaments (levothyroxine) for cancer treatment will be supplied in December.

An evaluation of the programme will be undertaken in October by external and internal experts.

An International Donor Meeting will be held in November to promote the long-term sustainability of the programme.

- Psycho-Social Support

The methods of conducting psychological assessments will be determined;

Discussions will be held with the ONSs leadership and others involved on integrating PSS into the duties of the visiting nurses and MDL staff;

Three counterparts will be appointed and funded in ONSs to co-ordinate the PSS component at the national level;

A handbook will be published on psychological first aid and coping with a disaster.

Given the different levels of development of PSS services in the three countries, a breakdown of activities per country follows:

Belarus

- run psychological screening - 1,200 patients
- provide 4,200 affected people with psycho-social support

- issue leaflets for the affected population on stress and radiation by July
- organise four professional self-help groups
- create a Mobile Information and Counselling Centre and four Centres for psychological assistance at Medico-Social Centres of Belarus Red Cross by October
- develop training materials and equip trained workers: March
- hold 12-one day workshops for Red Cross staff
- train 24 instructors on Stress Management, by August
- hold a workshop on PSS for Red Cross Chairpersons and local authorities: April
- extend the project into the communities to train 120 community members in 1999

Ukraine

- launch psychological screening for 600 patients: January
- provide 1,800 affected people with psycho-social support
- organise four professional self-help groups
- inform population about aims and activities of CHARP-PSS
- hold 12 one-day workshops for Red Cross staff
- hold follow-up workshops for the trained trainers
- hold a workshop on PSS for Red Cross Chairpersons and local authorities: March
- train 60 community members in 1999
- develop training materials and equip trained workers with a handbook on psychological first aid: January

Russia

- hold a workshop on PSS for Chairpersons and local authorities: September
- develop training materials and equip trained workers with a handbook on psychological first aid:
November
- hold a five-day Training of Trainers workshop: November

- hold three one-day workshops for RC staff and volunteers: December.

Capacity

- Management structure

The programme is supervised and co-ordinated by the International Chernobyl Co-ordination Committee (ICCC), composed of the Presidents of the three operational National Societies (Belarus, Ukraine and Russia) and the Head of the Federation Delegation in Minsk.

A CHARP counterpart from the three National Societies, together with the three local managers of the Federation's Delegation make up the Working Group (WG), chaired by the Head of the Federation's Delegation. The WG provides current evaluation of the implementation of the programme and draws up documents for the ICCC.

The day-to-day management of the programme at regional level is carried out by the Chairpersons of Regional Red Cross Committees where the MDLs are based, in conjunction with the local authorities and specialised medical dispensaries.

Psycho-Social Support component

The PSS activities will be continuously coached by the Co-ordinator based in Minsk. The counterparts in each ONS will facilitate links within their National Societies. Following its concept, the programme will be largely based on the Visiting Nurses who will be trained and supervised in their subsequent activities as trainers and helpers. The Red Cross volunteers will also be involved. Significant support and expertise will be provided by other partner-organisations described in Co-operation.

Co-operation

The Federation Delegation in Minsk maintains close connections with the Ministries of Health and Ministries of Emergencies (or corresponding ministries) in each country. In 1997 Memorandums of Understanding were established between National Societies (Belarus, Ukraine, Russia), the Ministries of Health and the Minsk Delegation of the Federation providing an appropriate legal base and clearly defining roles of all parties involved in the Programme. In addition, agreements regulating patient care exist between Red Cross Regional Committees, regional medical institutions and the Minsk Delegation.

CHARP also has close contacts with WHO, UNICEF, OCHA, and the Sasakawa Foundation as well as with radiological centres, dispensaries and leading specialists in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

The Psycho-Social Support component will continue its close co-operation with the Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support, hosted by the Danish Red Cross, which will supervise and advise on training and psychological aid. The

“UNESCO-Chernobyl” programme will lecture on stress, grief and coping at training sessions. Other bodies lending support include the State Pedagogical University (Belarus), the Belarus Health Psychology Association and the Belarus - Dutch Centre for Information and Health.