

PROGRAMME UPDATE



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

CHERNOBYL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE & REHABILITATION PROGRAMME (CHARP), BELARUS, UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

15 December
2004

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In Brief

Appeal No. 01.81/2004;
Programme Update no. 2,
Period covered: June-November 2004
Appeal target: CHF 873,112 (USD 700,000 or EUR 577,000)
For Appeal coverage & outstanding needs: [<Click here>](#)

Chernobyl Annual Appeal 2005: [<Click here>](#)

Programme summary:

During the reporting period, CHARP was focused on thyroid gland screening. The priority target group for the screening was individuals aged between 0-18 at the time of the Chernobyl accident and living in contaminated areas. Effective medical, social and psychological assistance was provided by six mobile diagnostic laboratories working in the six regions affected by the Chernobyl disaster. In the current year the programme has received donations from the Netherlands Red Cross, Japanese Red Cross and British Government/Department for International Development (DfID)

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This Programme Update reflects activities to be implemented over a one-year period. This forms part of, and is based on, longer-term, multi-year planning (refer below to access the detailed logframe documents). All International Federation assistance seeks to adhere to the [Code of Conduct](#) and is committed to the [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response](#) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. For support to or for further information concerning Federation programmes or operations in this or other countries, or for a full description of the National Society profile, please access the Federation's website at <http://www.ifrc.org>

Operational developments

During the 59th session of the UN General Assembly in October 2004, the Belarusian delegation put forward an initiative to organise an international conference in Minsk to mark the 20th anniversary of the nuclear power plant disaster in Chernobyl. The Republic of Belarus considers that this event will help significantly to promote international cooperation in ensuring the safety of nuclear power stations. It could also encourage the international research community in their search for the best strategies for medical and social rehabilitation of the affected population. Finally, it should contribute to speeding up the implementation of projects aimed at improving the quality of life of populations in the contaminated regions. The delegation appealed to the international community to support the anniversary in every possible way, and invited all interested parties to take part in the conference.

In other developments, the Belarusian government has reportedly confirmed that a large proportion of the so-called "Chernobyl-contaminated area" is now safe for habitation and agriculture.

To encourage people to return to the area, the government is reportedly offering housing and employment to families willing to relocate. At the same time, the Belarusian government has brought attention to the apparent lack of control over recuperation visits abroad by children living in radiation affected areas, and stated its prerogative to organise all such trips, whether funded nationally or internationally.

Ukraine - The International Seminar "Franco-German Initiative: its Results and Significance for Humans and the Environment", devoted to the creation of an information database on the radioactive, environmental and medical effects of the Chernobyl catastrophe, was held on 5-6 October 2004 in Kiev. The forum was attended by more than 200 scientists and specialists from several countries: Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, France, Germany, the United States, Japan, Britain, Slovakia, Cuba, Sweden, Ethiopia, as well as representatives of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the European Commission, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The main topics discussed included the safety of the sarcophagus covering the reactor, radioecology aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and the consequences of the disaster for the health of people. The seminar demonstrated the results of years of work by scientists from Ukraine, France, Germany, Russia, and Belarus on creating the information database.



The town of Prypyat, just north of the Chernobyl reactor, bears witness to the horror of the disaster.

Thyroid cancer incidence - According to a new study published in the online-edition of the International Journal of Epidemiology in July 2004, rates of thyroid cancers among women in Belarus have increased 12-fold in the years since the April 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine.

The authors noted that "the magnitude of increases observed is remarkable given the relatively limited time interval since Chernobyl." They found children ages 2 years and younger at the time of the accident tended to have more invasive cancer that expanded beyond the thyroid gland, which is located in the neck.

The sharpest increase in cancer of the thyroid was recorded by doctors in the area around Gomel, Belarus. More than 50 per cent of the children who contracted it were under 4 years old at the time of the disaster. In view of the pattern of cases reported to date, the World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that one third of all the children from the area around Gomel aged up to 4 at the time of the accident will develop thyroid cancer during their lifetime - a total of 50,000 children in this group alone. (*More information on this is available on the website: <http://www.chernobyl.info>*).

Sweden – More than 800 people in northern Sweden may have developed cancer as a result of the fallout of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. This conclusion was made in a new study of Swedish scientists "Chernobyl effects" published in November 2004. However their findings met with scepticism from some other experts who believe the radiation fallout in Sweden was not likely to cause such a rise in cases. (*More information on this is available on the website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4028729.stm>*).

Disaster Management

Overall Goal: The health of the population affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster is improved.

Programme Objective: Effective medical, social and psychological assistance is provided to targeted individuals in the six regions affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Expected results:

- Six mobile diagnostic laboratories will have screened 90,000 people for thyroid gland pathologies in the target group of individuals who were under 18 years old at the time of the accident and living in contaminated areas.
- Prevention of death from thyroid cancer because of timely detection and referral to medical institutions for treatment.
- Stress and anxiety linked to radiation is reduced for 15,000 people annually through psychosocial support.
- Immunity is improved for 15,000 children living in highly contaminated areas through winter supplies of multivitamins containing C, D and B group with iron, folic acid and stable iodine.
- Red Cross national societies have well trained and equipped mobile diagnostic laboratory teams carrying out diagnosis and treatment of ailments of the affected population in remote rural areas of the six highly-affected regions of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.
- The sustainability of CHARP is increased because of a new management strategy that hands over more programme responsibilities to Red Cross national societies and gradually integrates activities into the health care system.

Progress/Achievements

To achieve the set objectives the following activities were carried out during the reporting period:

- To date, in 2004, the specialists of six mobile diagnostic laboratories (MDL), working within CHARP, have checked **79,876** people. The examinations were concentrated on thyroid cancer screening among the priority target group, i.e. individuals who were between 0-18 at the time of the accident and living in contaminated areas. Abnormal scans (i.e. pathologies) were detected in **32,610** people.
- Since primary health care is rather limited in the remote rural areas, the CHARP programme fills the gap in State healthcare services to some extent. Although MDLs no longer provide mass blood and urine testing in

accordance with the recommendations of the latest programme evaluation, in addition to the thyroid screening the laboratory doctors carry out the diagnosis and treatment of other ailments upon complaints of patients or results of clinic tests. At present, this activity is comparatively limited ranging from about 20% in Ukraine to 50% in Belarus of all work performed by the MDLs.

- The MDL specialists, Red Cross workers and volunteers continued to provide psychosocial support (PSS) to the population affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Disseminating accurate information about the long-term health effects of the accident, using PSS tools such as counselling, active listening and others, they try to diminish stress in the affected communities. In July, Belarus and Russian Red Cross Societies organised refresher workshops on methods and tools for providing psychosocial assistance to the victims of Chernobyl. In Ukraine a similar PSS workshop will be held in December 2004. In addition, Belarus Red Cross is in the process of developing and printing an educational brochure on providing PSS support.

- In August-November 2004, the Netherlands Red Cross logistics services arranged procurement of the next portion of new equipment for the programme, reagents for MDLs and multivitamins for children living in highly contaminated areas. The goods will be supplied to the Belarus, Russian and Ukrainian Red Cross Societies in December 2004. The equipment includes microscopes, ultrasound scanner and other devices to be used for fine needle biopsies. To avoid customs problems some goods (MDL vehicles, computers etc.) were purchased locally.

- In order to increase programme sustainability, since 1 January 2004 CHARP has been working on the basis of a new management structure recommended by the Netherlands Red Cross review carried out in April 2003. In accordance with the new management structure the Belarus, Russian and Ukrainian National Societies have taken over responsibilities for the general planning, budgeting, reporting, staff training, logistics support and overall day-to-day running of the Chernobyl Programme. The Regional Red Cross Committees working directly with CHARP now report directly to their respective National Red Cross Society. In this context, the Federation is focused on coordination of technical support, as well as support in planning, financial management, monitoring, international representation and advocacy. The Programme strategy presupposes further integration of the programme into the State health systems of all three countries in order to enhance its sustainability.

Impact:

During January – November 2004, the MDL teams have referred **9,622** people to specialized medical institutions with suspected thyroid gland cancer. The diagnosis of cancer was verified in **201 cases** histologically (by microscopy of dyed tissue samples). The specialized clinics shared test results with the Red Cross. The above mentioned patients are receiving the necessary treatment and they are under monitoring of Red Cross MDLs and public healthcare settings.

As mentioned above the results of check-ups show that among the examined population, thyroid gland pathologies were detected in **32,610 cases** (41% of all examined). These people are also monitored by the MDL teams.

Besides thyroid cancer, two main thyroid pathologies detected by MDLs via screening included diffuse goitre – 17,817 cases (54.6%) of all people detected with thyroid pathologies; and nodular pathology – 9127 cases (28%). Thyroidites were suspected in 1,820 cases (8%).



Olga, 17, lives in the radiation-affected village of Laski in Ukraine. She has just learnt she has signs of thyroid pathology and needs to undergo regular check-ups. Rates of thyroid cancer in contaminated areas have increased by up to 12-fold since the nuclear reactor exploded.

Constraints:

There were no major problems in the implementation of the project during the reporting period. The work was fulfilled in accordance with the objectives set. However there were serious difficulties with clearing goods at customs in Bryansk, Russia. It is relevant to mention that customs procedures in this country have always been complicated. This time the problem became even more complicated due the disbanding of the Humanitarian Commission by the government at the beginning of 2004 and delayed finalisation of a new Commission only in October 2004. Therefore the goods (medical equipment, reagents and multivitamins) supplied by the Netherlands Red Cross were held up by customs procedures for almost nine months. Eventually at the end of November the goods cleared customs. To avoid such delays in the future, where possible all necessary goods will be purchased locally.

Another ongoing issue is the difficulty in fulfilling the target plan for examination i.e. 90,000 people per year by all six laboratories. The experience obtained by MDLs shows that it is sometimes not feasible to reach the target number of examinations (70 checks per day) while screening the target group (age 0-18 at time of disaster) in remote areas, where in some villages only a few representatives of this group are resident. This issue was discussed at the workshop for CHARP personnel held in November 2004. It was agreed at the meeting that the next CHARP evaluation mission should pay particular attention to this issue in order to find an efficient solution (*Detailed information on this workshop is described in the following section*).

All-CHARP Workshop

According to the CHARP Plan of Action and approved programme budget for 2004, a workshop was held on 1-6 November 2004 in "Sanatorium "Pushcha Ozerna" situated near Kiev. The 48 participants included MDL staff, chairpersons of Regional Red Cross Committees, national CHARP managers, head doctors of the medical institutions where the MDLs are based. A presentation about the International Federation of RC/RC was made by the Federation's Representative in Ukraine. Lectures on thyroid cancer epidemiology incidence in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were delivered by leading specialists of these countries. The CHARP coordinator presented the trends and outlook of the project. The heads of MDLs and chairpersons shared with their experience obtained in implementation of the programme.

The participants discussed issues regarding CHARP activities and outlined ways for improving programme efficiency. In particular the findings of the workshop are as follows:

- The participants discussed how to improve the information system in CHARP. It was decided to create an electronic network linking MDLs with National Red Cross Society headquarters and the Kiev Office where the CHARP coordinator and Medical Adviser are based.
- The software used by Brest MDL (recognised as the most appropriate and efficient software) will be installed in computers used by other MDLs to create the virtual information system mentioned above. Brest MDL has already shared this software with other MDL colleagues during the workshop. A standard linked network providing a reliable database for the programme will be operational by December.
- Biopsies for detecting thyroid cancer are being carried out effectively in Brest Oblast. It was agreed that the doctors of other Belarus MDL teams (Gomel and Mogilev) will be trained in December for performing fine needle biopsies in the field as well.
- Local legislation prevents use of similar biopsies by MDLs operating in the field in Russian and Ukraine. Therefore Bryansk Diagnostic Centre (Russia) sends its specialists to the field to conduct biopsies in patients with suspected thyroid cancer as detected by the Red Cross MDL teams. In future medical institutions in Zhitomir (Diagnostic Center) and Rovno (Endocrinology Center) in Ukraine will carry out biopsies following the same methodology as in Bryansk.
- The issue of biopsies will be included into agreements between Regional Red Cross branches and local medical authorities. The drafts of these documents were discussed at the workshop. Once operational contracts between the Federation and National Societies are signed the agreements between medical institutions and Regional Red Cross Committees will be concluded.
- On the basis of the above mentioned agreements feedback with the medical institutions will be improved. The representatives from medical institutions promised to provide access for Red Cross doctors to their medical registers.

- Several logistics matters were discussed (equipment, reagents, supplies etc.)

The workshop facilitator was the Federation Medical Adviser based at Kiev Office. The participants reported full satisfaction with the results of the forum. However the main task now is to implement the decisions and plans developed at the workshop.

Conclusion s

During the reporting period CHARP was focused on thyroid cancer screening and providing psycho-social support to the target population. The diagnostic abilities and quality of examinations of the six MDLs was improved through provision of new sophisticated equipment and all necessary reagents.

Data collected by the MDLs illustrates the rather poor health of the population in the contaminated areas. An increase of oncology pathology of the thyroid gland (cancer) especially in persons who were children at the time of the disaster is one of most topical problems and the main concern of CHARP. The MDLs offer thousands of people living in radiation contaminated areas the opportunity to receive objective information on their health status, enabling them to undertake adequate actions to prevent and treat detected diseases. CHARP operates in remote villages where health services of a similar level and quality have never been available and are unlikely to be introduced in the near future due to the current economic situation in the three countries. As a result, the Red Cross programme provides for numerous beneficiaries the only access to medical screening with particular attention paid to the most urgent health consequences of the nuclear disaster such as thyroid gland cancer. Timely diagnosis - a major but missing link in the State healthcare in contaminated areas - remains a prerequisite for saving lives of those who are victims of the world's worst nuclear accident.