

# **CHERNOBYL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMME (CHARP) : BELARUS, RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND UKRAINE**

9 June, 1999

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*CHARP maintained the emphasis on increasing the number of medical check-ups, with a focus on thyroid gland examinations, and improving and expanding psycho-social assistance to the population. An important part of CHARP's activity continues to be the provision of enriched multivitamins for children living in contaminated areas and levothyroxine medicaments for people with thyroid gland pathologies. However, the programme is facing a severe shortage of funds, and a number of initiatives are under consideration to secure the required support. In addition, a critical ECHO decision on funding is pending.*

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## ***The context***

The explosion of the fourth unit of the Chernobyl nuclear plant on 26 April, 1986 contaminated huge areas in Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation, with a population over 4 million people. In 1990 the Federation launched the Red Cross Chernobyl Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation Programme (CHARP). It first concentrated on screening food supplies and the surrounding environment through radiometric testing. From 1992 onwards six mobile diagnostic laboratories (MDLs), based in six highly affected regions, screened background radiation and provided medical examinations to adults and children in remote areas. They also distributed basic health information to the population on measures to avoid radioactive contamination.

In 1996, CHARP underwent certain modifications. Since the radiation situation had stabilised, the dosimetrical part was reduced and the number of people targeted for medical screening was increased, from 60,000 to 90,000 per annum, with a special focus on children and people who were children at the moment of the accident -- the most vulnerable in terms of thyroid gland pathologies.

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.

Further element of the revised CHARP was the introduction of a psycho-social service project (PSS). This began as a pilot project in 1997 in Belarus, where Red Cross workers and volunteers were trained in PSS helping techniques. In November 1998, the project was started in Ukraine.

CHARP also supplies multivitamins, milk powder and some medicaments, including 'Levothyroxine', which is used for the treatment of people with thyroid conditions.

## ***Latest events***

### **Belarus**

The organising committee of the First International Congress on Demographic Problems of Belarus, held in Minsk in March, released the text of an appeal to UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in which they draw his attention to the conditions in Belarus after the largest industrial accident in the history of mankind. Two-thirds of the radioactive fallout landed on the territory of Belarus and a fourth of the country's population directly suffered from the disaster, says the appeal, which stresses that the international community's assistance is needed and Belarus is not able to handle the Chernobyl aftermath alone.

From 1989 to 1998, the incidence of all types of cancer in Minsk rose from 229,9 to 315,4 cases per 100,000 residents, up 37.2 percent, said the chief physician at the Minsk city Cancer Centre at a May 11 news conference. Minsk was strongly affected by the Chernobyl catastrophe, he said. The Belarus capital ranks second after the Gomel region in the incidence of thyroid cancer, which rose in Minsk by 24,8 percent from 113 to 141 cases a year in the period from 1994 to 1998. There will be about 6,000 people with such cancers in Minsk by 2000.

A national social and psychological rehabilitation service is to be set up at the Zhdanovichi centre for the rehabilitation of children. The director of the centre said 8,114 children have already received treatment at the centre, which was established by the joint efforts of Belarus, China, Italy, Japan and Russia.

Concerning physical health, the number of children with chronic diseases has risen from 10 to 22 percent since 1986. The figures were given by the Minister of Emergency Situations to the National Assembly in Minsk on April 26, the 13th anniversary of the Chernobyl accident.

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### **Ukraine**

The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine has earmarked UAH 1.1 million from its reserve fund for emergency situations prevention at Chernobyl power units N1 and 2. (Such expenditures were also provided by the 1998 state budget but were not financed.) Power units N1 and 2 are now being put out of operation. The Cabinet also endorsed a new version of a radioactive waste treatment programme for the period until 2005. To turn the "sarcophagus" at Chernobyl into an ecologically safe system, the programme provides for the construction, by 2010, of a new casing over the shelter. In order to build an underground storage facility, in the course of 2003-2005 possible sites will be selected on the basis of ecological and geological research.

The National Agency for Development and European Integration (NADEI) is co-ordinating efforts to secure foreign sources of funding to resolve the social problems facing the town of Slavutych, built up after the Chernobyl disaster for the families of the personnel of the plant. According to the head of the Slavutych municipal council, 1,000 people are presently jobless in the town and 3,000 more will lose their jobs when the power plant's nuclear reactors are shut down. NADEI Chairman Roman Shpek, outlining the projects forming part of the Slavutych special economic zone in April, stressed the need to draft measures to attract loan and investment resources and international technical assistance. He noted Ukraine's successful co-operation with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

(EBRD). He added that the European Union's technical assistance programme will also facilitate creation of new jobs for Slavutych residents.

## ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

### **Medical examination**

The results of medical screening performed during January-April 1999 are presented in the following table:

<i>MDL</i>	<i>Numbers examined</i>						
		<i>Adults</i>	<i>Sick</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Sick</i>	<i>%</i>
BREST	5,565	2,839	1,776	62.6	2,726	1,995	73.2
GOMEL	5,515	2,691	832	30,9	2,824	774	27,4
MOGILEV	5,125	3,218	2,753	85,6	1,907	1,315	71,2
BRYANSK	5,129	1,742	1,423	81,7	3,387	3,048	89,9
ZHITOMIR	4,113	961	707	73,6	3,152	2,418	76,7
ROVNO	4,791	2,068	1,381	66,8	2,723	1,669	61,3
<b><i>TOTAL</i></b>	30,238	13,519	8,872	65,6	16,719	11,262	67,4

In the course of the medical screening various pathologies were detected in 8,872 out of 13,519 adults (65.6%) and 11,262 out of 16,719 children (67.4%). These cases were referred for further examination or treatment. The check-ups detected thyroid gland pathologies in 28.5% of the examined adult population. Among children the pathology was found in 28.4% of patients.

***Thyroid gland cancer:*** during the reporting period the MDL personnel referred 568 adults and 169 children to specialised medical institutions for cytological examinations for suspected thyroid cancer. This diagnosis was confirmed in 11 cases. The remaining cases were diagnosed as pathologies requiring treatment with L-thyroxine under the supervision of endocrinologists and oncologists.

### **Psycho-Social Support (PSS)**

CHARP psychological support to people affected by the Chernobyl disaster continued, provided by RC local staff and volunteers at medico-social centres, as well as by the MDL personnel. It aimed at restoring a person's inner resources and the ability to control his/her life. The counselling process includes cognitive reinterpretation, "stress ventilation" and correction of inadequate coping. This support was given first of all to people with severe emotional disturbance caused by a crisis situation (a major disease, such as thyroid gland cancer). In total 2,412 persons have received this kind of psychological assistance in Belarus and Ukraine.

An important part of the PSS provides information and training for the population. Information on radiation and stress-related illness reduces anxiety caused by a lack of knowledge, and diminishes psychosomatic reactions.

The RC staff also provide information on the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe, methods of coping with stress and reducing the risk of radiation. On these topics 58 lectures and group meetings were organised, attended by 1,917 people. Besides 38 newspaper articles, radio and TV interviews were given. In addition, relief workers, mostly the MDL staff members, who are also vulnerable to stress, were counselled on coping with stress and preventing professional burnout: 11 group counselling sessions were conducted for RC staff in Belarus and Ukraine.

### **Training**

***MDL personnel***

From January to May, the CHARP team organised training of MDL personnel. In February a workshop trained PC operators in the use of new software which facilitates the collection of medical information for the CHARP data bank.

In March, all twelve MDL technicians were given a one week training course at the Republican Dispensary of Radiation Medicine (RDRM) in Minsk in modern methods of haematological and urine diagnosis.

In May, a two-week advanced training course, mainly on ultrasound and endocrinology diagnosis, was organised for 17 MDL doctors at the RDRM. In January-February, three ultrasound doctors from Brest and Gomel MDLs (Belarus) and Rovno MDL (Ukraine) took a training course at the Red Cross Atomic Bomb Hospitals of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

***PSS***

Training of RC staff and volunteers in PSS continued in Belarus and Ukraine. Two follow up workshops were run in Belarus in February and April for trained Belarus RC trainers. The training includes case studies and drills.

Trained RC staff and volunteers ran one-day workshops on psychological support for 583 local RC staff and volunteers through 24 "second wave" workshops and other training in contaminated regions between January and March.

Training of Ukrainian RC trainers in psycho-social support, started in November 1998, was continued at a workshop in March 1999. In the first wave of workshops, 29 RC staff from Ukrainian contaminated regions were trained. The purpose of the workshops was to give information and provide the participants with some practical training course education, in order to strengthen the Red Cross staff's role in problem solving and crisis intervention, based on simple and reliable skills and tools. After the workshop, the participants started to train their colleagues, volunteers and other helpers in the contaminated zones.

The teams of the mobile diagnostic laboratories were more involved in training in order to develop their skills in psycho-social support. As follow up training, supervision sessions were organised for 5 Belarus and Ukrainian RC MDL teams.

***Outstanding issues - Problems with CHARP Funding***

The main donor to CHARP from 1994 through 1998 has been ECHO (European Community Humanitarian Office). It provided funding for the major part of the MDLs' running costs, milk powder, multivitamins, L-thyroxin and some other medicaments. However, in 1999 ECHO had to stop this funding as its internal regulations only allow short-term financing periods. As a result, CHARP finds itself facing serious funding difficulties and will shortly have to scale down its activities in all three countries, unless financing becomes rapidly available. At the moment, funds -- including an amount of CHF 457,213 carried over from 1998 -- will be exhausted by the end of this month (June 1999). About CHF 700,000 is needed to cover the second half of the current year. To continue CHARP next year on the present scale would require about CHF 1,500,000 for the year 2000 and for each following year.

Various initiatives have been taken to maintain funding. They include contacts with over a dozen interested National Societies, contacts with a similar number of embassies in Minsk and representations to the President of the EU Delegation for Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova at the Parliament in Strasbourg..

An urgent meeting of donors has been convened to discuss the situation. The German Red Cross has agreed to host the meeting, scheduled for 21 June in Frankfurt.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

On 28 April, the CHARP Co-ordinator and Information Officer attended an international seminar on "Chernobyl. Problems and mass media", held in Minsk by the State Committee on the Press. The main objective of the seminar was to obtain reliable information about the Belarusian government's policy in handling the Chernobyl aftermath, as well as to enhance the role of the media in helping victims of the disaster overcome the "Chernobyl syndrome", and favour international humanitarian assistance. According to Ivan Kenik, chairman of the Committee on Consequences of the Chernobyl Catastrophe, the Belarus government's expenditure on the Chernobyl consequences has shrunk from 20 to 8 percent of the budget.

The Medical Co-ordinator took part in a WHO Workshop held in Minsk on 11 February. It was devoted to studies of iodine deficiency which can lead to thyroid gland pathologies.

On 2 March the CHARP Co-ordinator took part in a meeting with top UN-OCHA staff at the UN Representation in Minsk. Also taking part were representatives from organisations such as WHO, IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF. The participants mainly discussed how to energise Chernobyl humanitarian assistance.

In March, the CHARP Co-ordinator participated in Project Cycle Management training (PCM), organised by EULIOF and held at the Belgian RC Headquarters in Brussels. PCM is the method, introduced by the European Commission for the identification, formulation (appraisal), implementation and evaluation of projects. It is now being implemented as a standard method for many bilateral donors in Europe and among national governments in many recipient countries.

On 14 and 15 May, the Head of the Federation's Minsk Delegation visited Kiev, where he met with the Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the European Commission to discuss issues concerning the Chernobyl Programme and possible funding through the EU.

From 10 to 14 May, two Finnish journalists visited Kiev to gather information on the Chernobyl Programme in Ukraine.

At the end of May the CHARP team visited contaminated areas, including the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and measured the still high degree of radiation. This varied greatly: in Minsk city - about 0,06 mGy/h; in Gomel region - about 0,6 - 0,7 mGy/h; at the nuclear power plant - 6.0 mGy/h or nearly 100 times higher than the normal level.

The Secretariat has initiated various contacts with EBRD as part of its efforts to resolve the current CHARP funding crisis.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

## ***Conclusion***

Almost thirteen years after the Chernobyl disaster, the situation in the three affected countries -- Belarus, Russia and Ukraine -- remains alarming. Concerns about cancer attributable to the accident still exist. Important questions remain open with regard to the effects of radiation on human health. The psycho-social impact of the accident on the population is obvious and has been underlined at numerous international Chernobyl conferences. There is therefore a continuing necessity to provide comprehensive humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the disaster, and this calls for the concerted efforts of all concerned.

CHARP, a well organised and co-ordinated programme, provides the population with vital medical and psychological assistance. It is especially important for people living in remote and radiation polluted areas. For many of them, the check by the MDLs is the first medical examination since the Chernobyl accident. In Ukraine and Bryansk Region (Russia) the Red Cross MDLs are the only mobile laboratories operating in rural areas. In all regions the work of the MDLs is co-ordinated with the health authorities. The data they collect confirms a poor state of health among the population in the affected areas. There is still a high incidence of thyroid gland pathologies and cancer, especially in children and persons who were young at the time of the disaster.

Experts from research and scientific centres in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, as well as scientists from other countries, expect these illnesses to peak in the years 2005-2010. These bleak prospects, together with a deterioration in living conditions and a drastic reduction in health and social welfare services throughout the former Soviet Union, point out to a clear and compelling need for the Programme to continue. Since services of such a level and quality cannot be provided in the near future by the Governments of the three countries, solutions must be found to solve CHARP's current financial difficulties.

It is important to emphasise that, if the appeal is not 100% covered, all these urgently needed CHARP services will have to be scaled down and the Red Cross staff reduced by as many as 50 local employees.

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