

course everyone remembers Chernobyl, the world's worst nuclear accident. But today very few recall, if they ever knew, that the disaster affected the lives of four million people in three countries -- permanently.

When the fire was extinguished and the clouds of radiation had rolled away, four million people looked at their food and water and wondered whether it was poisoned. They went about their daily lives and wondered whether they were mortally ill. They looked at their children and wondered whether they had a future. The worst was not knowing -- and information was in short supply.

More than a decade later, some answers have emerged and the full effects of the tragedy are becoming clearer. As radiation's impact on the contamination of food and water, a darkening picture of disease took shape.

Statement by the Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The medical statistics, mount evidence of a growing incidence of thyroid gland conditions, including cancer amongst young people and of endocrine deficiencies among children which result in obesity or emaciation, delay in growth and weight, sluggishness and inertia. Additionally, and most easily identifiable, were the widespread psychological effects of upheaval, anxiety and stress.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies launched its Chernobyl Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation Programme (CHARP) in 1990. It began with the most urgent measures: monitoring radiation in people and their food supplies and the mass distribution of factual, user friendly information on protective health measures. Its next step was to set up six Mobile Diagnostic Laboratories (MDLs) -- high tech labs on wheels that bumped their way across the back roads of the contaminated areas in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, screening background radiation and medically examining up to 60,000 people a year in the most seriously affected areas of the three states. Often the labs were one of the few contacts the affected population had with the health services. The results of MDLs findings are particularly bleak -- in the course of medical screening, various pathologies (diseases of the endocrine system, blood circulation system, bones and muscles) are being detected in both adults and children. Also, the results show continued tendency of worsening health status of population living in the contaminated areas. The increase of disease incidence is traced in all classes of diseases affecting first of all digestive, cardiovascular, nervous, endocrine and urine systems in adults, as well as children. The growth of the disease incidence is registered in populations living in the areas with a low level of radiation. The frequency of prenatal dysfunctions is at a high level as well as birth defects.

When radiation stabilized, monitoring was reduced and medical screening of the population was increased. The labs now examine 100,000 people annually, with a special focus on children and people who were children at the time of the explosion -- the most vulnerable in terms of thyroid gland cancer. All health conditions requiring further care are referred to state health services. Surveys concern up to 70 per cent of the patients examined, a figure that reflects not only the effects of Chernobyl, but also the difficult economic situation felt in all the three countries.

In addition to the labs' work, the programme distributes multivitamins to children living in contaminated areas to boost their resistance, and more than 15,000 patients who have undergone thyroid gland surgery are provided with a hormone medicament. But more than just medical care was needed, as Red Cross professionals and volunteers working in the programme came to realize. The drama had left deep psychological scars. Threatened by a phenomenon beyond most people's grasp, forced in some cases to leave their homes and fearful for their health, many inhabitants of the disaster stricken areas felt life was hardly worth living.

A psycho-social support programme was begun as a pilot project in 1997 in Belarus, extended to Ukraine in late 1998, and then to Bryansk Oblast, one of the worst affected areas in the Russian Federation, in late 1999.

So far, nearly 250 Red Cross workers and volunteers have been trained in counseling skills and have provided psychological support for about 15,000 people, besides holding general information sessions on the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster that have reached a total audience of over 8,000.

In just over ten years, CHARP has assisted two and a half million people. The mobile diagnostic laboratories, have screened more than 400,000 people, referring about 169,000 of them to medical institutions for further examination or treatment. Medical data, meanwhile, continues to plot a rising graph of disease, with figures of thyroid cancer cases in 2000 showing a 34% increase over 1999.

Chernobyl is an ongoing human drama -- one that requires a complex array of support services if the population is to receive the care it deserves. Instead, Chernobyl's victims face realities of life in states where the economy is not strong yet and health services are facing serious difficulties. Unfortunately, help from the international community has faded away. Although foreign governments have recently released close to one billion US dollars for technological improvements, including a new nuclear power plant, the sum total of humanitarian assistance from all agencies represents just five per cent of this amount.

The International Federation's Chernobyl programme is closely coordinated with programmes of the UN system and other organizations, ensuring that costs are kept at an absolute minimum and that there is no duplication or waste. Despite these efforts the programme, which costs some 1,5 million US dollars yearly, is running out of funds. Money in hand can ensure its survival for only a few months, rather than its scheduled six years, until 2006.

The International Federation hopes this book will help to reawaken the interest of the international donor community in Chernobyl's victims. First, for humanity's sake: several million people are struggling with a terrible aftermath of despair and illness. But also because, as recent smaller scale alerts have shown, there could be other Chernobyls. The world needs to know all it can about the extent and the effects of such a disaster and what emergency measures and long term action is called for, so that it is better prepared if -- or when -- a similar disaster occurs. Continuing help is a protective investment that could save lives in the future and prevent others from sharing the same fate as the men, women and children of Chernobyl.

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