

**Statement of Mr. Ross Mountain**  
**Director OCHA Geneva on behalf of the**  
**United Nations Coordinator for International Cooperation on Chernobyl**  
**26 April 2001**

Appropriate Salutations

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for coming here today. On behalf of the Secretary General and the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Kenzo Oshima, who is also the United Nations Coordinator for International Cooperation on Chernobyl, I like to thank you for taking the time today to remember the events of fifteen years ago that surrounded the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear facility.

As I am sure you are aware, this was an accident of unprecedented proportions. The important point is that there are still over nine million people dealing with the lingering humanitarian consequences of this disaster. So I would like to draw your attention to the actions that are on-going today to try to relieve some of the human suffering that still lingers in the affected region.

Before I turn to the current and future efforts to address the current needs, I would like to take a moment to recognize the heroic actions taken in response to the disaster.

The burden of the immediate response to this event fell to emergency personnel from the local area and the population. As we remember these events it is appropriate to pay tribute to the courage of the emergency personnel, or "liquidators", many of whom were volunteers, who responded to this accident. They accepted the grave personal risk of contamination in order to contain the radiation and the inherent damage to the

surrounding communities. These were truly heroic efforts that saved countless lives in the most affected states and beyond their borders.

Likewise, the communities in the region have shown great courage. The people of the most affected regions in Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation, who in the last 15 years have endured the hardships and persisted in their efforts to try to return their families and communities to some state of normalcy. The affected population numbers in the millions. Many of them were not even born at the time of the emergency, but still must face the physical, psychological, environmental and socio-economic consequences of the accident. These challenges persist and they require that courage and perseverance be transmitted from one generation to another. The continued efforts to try to find innovative means for overcoming the consequences of this disaster and reestablishing the economies in the affected areas demonstrate this strength of character.

In 1990, at the request of the affected states and the international humanitarian community, the United Nations General Assembly entrusted the task of strengthening international cooperation and coordination of assistance to the victims of Chernobyl to the UN Secretariat.

We, in the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, have carried out this responsibility since 1993 and have made a concerted effort with the other members of the international humanitarian community to assist the affected population. In doing so, our biggest challenge has been to educate the donor community on the lingering human affects of the accident.

When we in the United Nations first confronted the Chernobyl emergency, we expected that the collective national and international effort to return the situation to an acceptable level of normalcy would have comprehensive results in a few years' time. Clearly this did not happen. We were ignorant of the secondary consequences in terms of human, social and economic trauma.

If we had better understood the consequences of Chernobyl, or at least had been willing to admit our ignorance, we might have been able to mobilize more of the resources necessary to confront the lingering humanitarian effects of the emergency.

Part of this is due to tension between scientific and humanitarian concerns. The effects of radiation are, according to the scientists, very measurable. The half-life of an isotope and the level of radiation to be expected in the future are relatively easily forecast with existing technology. These are the technical dimensions of the issue. However, the social and economic impact of this isotope, or simply the fear of this contamination after an accident, are extremely difficult to measure and are therefore often underestimated.

This failure to adequately communicate the long-term consequences of the disaster had an immediate impact on our ability to raise funds and other resources necessary to respond effectively.

We have made significant progress in closing this gap between scientists and humanitarians by working closely with our colleagues from the International Atomic Energy Agency and regional scientific agencies. There is now strong agreement that the social and economic consequences of the disaster, as well as mitigation efforts, must be taken into consideration.

There is no question that there are still humanitarian consequences from this disaster. They are difficult to measure but you need only walk among the people of the affected regions in Belarus, Ukraine and the Russian Federation, visit the children, and see the communities to gauge these effects. Since not everyone can do this, we deeply appreciate the efforts of those who have tried to bring the message into focus and provide graphic evidence of the impact through photographic exhibits.

In fact today, in New York, there is a major photographic exhibit being opened by the Deputy-Secretary General. This is a joint effort on the part of the United Nations and civil society. There will be a similar exhibit here in Geneva in August. We deeply

appreciate the efforts of those providing these necessary reminders of the events and the current suffering.

I think you will agree that the message is clear. More must be done to address the suffering of the affected population. So let me conclude by sharing some of the key points in our strategy for dealing with the current situation and moving forward.

Mr. Oshima recently highlighted three points in the strategy at the international conference on Chernobyl held in Kiev last week.

First, we are well past the immediate emergency phase of this disaster and have exhausted the resources made available by donors for this purpose. Therefore, we must now look toward more mid-range rehabilitation and long-term development solutions.

We have been in consultations with the appropriate United Nations agencies, the governments of the affected states, the donor states and representatives of civil society regarding the need for a transition to a development-based approach and there seems to be strong support for this strategy.

Second, in order to effectively mobilize the necessary resources for the strategy, Mr. Oshima has appealed to the donor community to provide funds to sustain key programmes and projects initiated during the emergency and recovery phases of our response. This appeal was addressed to the contributors to the Chernobyl Shelter Fund asking that they contribute an additional one or two per cent to deal with the lingering humanitarian consequences of the disaster.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, together with the UN agencies that will take the lead in this new strategy, are preparing an assessment mission that will focus on the lingering socio-economic and developmental consequences of the accident. This assessment will provide the facts necessary for these agencies to develop programmes tailored to the long-term needs of the affected communities. We have

advanced funds for this assessment and it should begin in the next several weeks. We expect the assessment to be completed by the end of the summer and issue a new programme proposal in the fall.

Last, but not least, we have redoubled our efforts to communicate to the international community the fact that the consequences of such accidents can and will linger for decades. Significant work still remains to be done to address the legitimate humanitarian needs of the communities affected by Chernobyl and finding the resources to meet these needs is indeed a challenge. This is a task with which we must continue before the images of the human price paid at Chernobyl fade from our collective memory.

Finally, I would also like to thank again for your participation in today's event and appeal for your continued support in delivering the message regarding Chernobyl.

