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**The Chernobyl Accident:**  
**Understanding Its Wider Impact on the People of Belarus**

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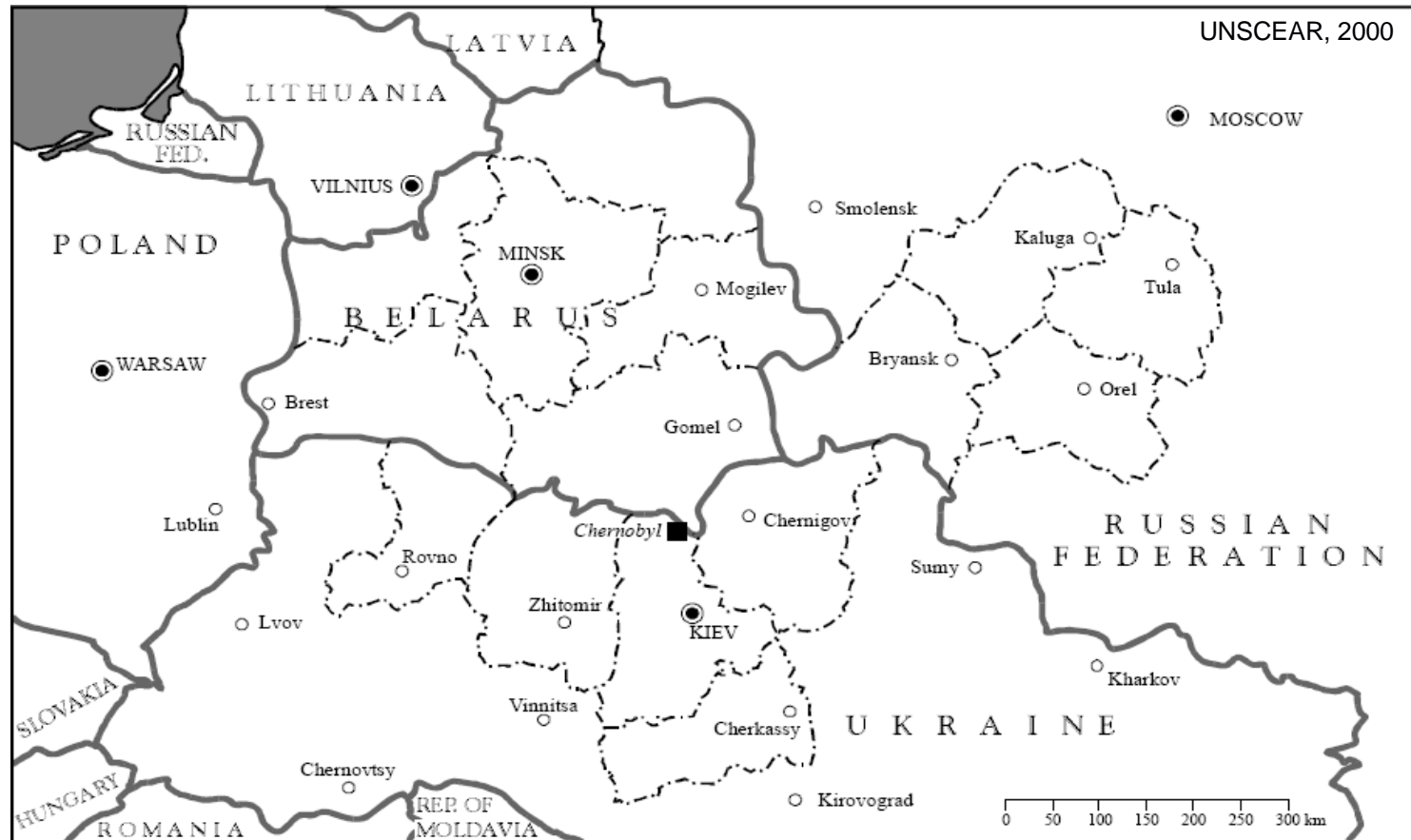
## Outline

- **Introduction: the Chernobyl Accident and Belarus**
- **The International Consensus Regarding the Health Consequences**
- **Some Implications for the Affected People and for the Assistance Effort**
- **Concluding Remarks: Our Shared Responsibility?**

## The Chernobyl Accident and Belarus

- Belarus was severely affected – 70% of total radioactive fallout left 23% of its territory contaminated
- 25,000 people were evacuated from the exclusion zone, where 70 villages were buried
- 110,000 people were resettled
- 110,000 people were conscripted as emergency clean-up workers ('liquidators')
- 1.3 million people, including 500,000 children, still live in the affected areas

## Administrative Regions Surrounding the Chernobyl NPP



## Framing of the Impact: Radiation vs Radiophobia

- “the mental health impact of Chernobyl is the largest public health problem unleashed by the accident to date” (*The Chernobyl Forum, 2003-2005:36*).
- “Fear of radiation has proved a health threat in itself” (*UNDP, 2006*).

VS

- statements by international experts “suggest[ed] that estimating ‘psychological pressure’ requires no proof .... the authority of nuclear experts is presumed sufficient for diagnosing populations with anxiety and radiophobia” (*Kuchinskaya, 2007:88*).
- “these are not exactly the most motivating environments to be part of! So, if there is passivity, I think it’s understandable” (*a senior INGO officer, 27 April 2010*).

## Framing of the Impact: Radiation Effects

- “[t]he impact was much smaller than anybody could have predicted” and “[t]he danger of radiation has largely passed” (*Kalman Mizsei, UNDP, 2005*).
- “the vast majority of people living in “contaminated” areas are in fact highly unlikely to experience negative health effects from radiation exposure and can safely raise families where they are today” (*UN, 2008:2*).

VS

- “In our town ... three drivers died. They used to transport the soil [during the clean-up operation in the contaminated areas], they were strong men...” (*Aleksandr V., ‘liquidator’, 26 May 2009*).
- “Many people lost their health; many have died before their time” (*Anatoliy G., ‘liquidator’, 28 May 2009*).
- “Every year, there are fewer and fewer of us left” (*Vladimir F., ‘liquidator’, 28 May 2009* ).

## Implications: Chernobyl ‘Ghosts’

**They are invisible, because:**

- **they are not there, having died, fled or been resettled;**
- **their health effects are not officially linked to the Chernobyl accident;**
- **their health effects are linked to the accident, but their numbers are statistically insignificant; or**
- **their health effects are accounted for statistically, and, therefore, partially ‘visible’, but only as numbers, as an aggregate phenomenon.**







## Early days after the accident

- **“people were given three hours to leave their village. They took their cows to the collective farm, but the cows broke through the farm gates and each of them was running home howling. People could not take anything with them, neither dogs nor cows, and animals could feel that, and it was scary” (Aliaksandr V., ‘liquidator’, 26 May 2009).**
- **“we saw those resettled villages, empty houses with gardens full with apples that were falling and rotting; it created an awful impression as if everything had died out, had died...” (Aliaksandr P., ‘liquidator’, 18 May 2009).**
- **“It was depressing: abandoned dogs and cats; allotments not tended to; everything overgrown. One could not even pass through for the branches of cherry, pear and plum trees: everything had gone wild ...; that’s how it was like there” (Anatoliy G., ‘liquidator’, 28 May 2009).**



РАДИАЦИОННАЯ ОПАСНОСТЬ



## Thyroid Cancer: Invisibility of Suffering

- “the five million residents living in Chernobyl-affected areas received low doses of radiation .... This level of exposure resulted in no observable radiation-induced health effects, aside from a rise in the incidence of thyroid cancer (successfully treated [in] virtually all cases)” (*UNDP, 2005b*).
- According to the 2008 UNSCEAR Report, “Although thyroid cancer incidence continues to increase ..., up to 2005 only 15 cases had proved fatal” (*UNSCEAR, 2008:27*).
- “My driver, for instance, he died - thyroid cancer; I myself only have half of my thyroid, and new nodules have recently been discovered, but I won’t be going through another operation ..., I will just live with it” (*Vladimir F., ‘liquidator’, 28 May 2009*).

## Implications for the Assistance Effort

- “The end goal of ICRIN is to tackle the ‘Chernobyl victim syndrome’, uncertainties and fatalism about health as well as deep-seated misconceptions that exist in the minds of people with regard to dangers to their livelihoods” (*www.chernobyl.info*).
- “What people needed most [was] a restored sense of community self-reliance, and the information necessary to overcome fears associated with radiation and to address health threats arising from causes unrelated to Chernobyl” (*UN, 2008:2*).
- “People would ask us, What will you give us? And we would say, Nothing. ... Eventually they understood that co-operation was not about building roads, it was about training and microcredit” (*interview with a programme coordinator of 27 May 2009*).



## Concluding Thoughts

- **“Chernobyl liquidators will be forgotten. I wish we were not ... It is important that there is an understanding that we are not making things up, that we have suffered” (*Anatoliy G., ‘liquidator’, 28 May 2009*).**
- **“I do not need any help, but I wish people still living there or who fell ill due to radiation received the assistance they need and deserve” (*Aliaksandr P., ‘liquidator’, 18 May 2009*).**
- **“Commitment is just not there. Everyone is like – well, tough... it happened so long ago. We moved on... poor people of Chernobyl... etc. More advocacy is needed, but the question is to whom? .... Chernobyl is sort of a nuisance if you like. ... It’s fading away in people’s memories” (senior INGO officer, 27 April 2010).**



**THANK YOU!**

