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The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Apr 27, 1990;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1993)

pg. A1

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Soviet Officials Concede Health Risks Broader Than Acknowledged

By Elizabeth Shogren

Special to The Washington Post

CHUDYANY, U.S.S.R.—On the fourth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, this log cabin village in eastern Byelorussia is a ghost town. Even the birds have gone.

Just a few months ago, the village was full of people, although it had been hit by the highest levels of radiation outside the immediate vicinity of the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl. But, because Chudyany lies 200 miles from the scene of the world's worst nuclear accident, nobody was evacuated. The school kept functioning and people continued to eat locally grown produce.

The belated evacuation of Chudyany reflects the changing theories of Soviet scientists over the amount of radiation a human being can tolerate during the course of a lifetime.

After the catastrophe in 1986, Soviet experts said people could safely absorb 70 roentgens, the standard measure of radiation in a person's body. By last October, Byelorussian officials had declared seven roentgens to be the maximum permissible exposure, and drew up plans to expand the evacuation zone beyond the original 18-mile radius from Chernobyl.

"People lost all faith in scientists, government officials and even their doctors, because four years have passed and they're still here," said Vasily Chigryai, a doctor at a collective farm in Krasnopole, not far from Chudyany.

Chigryai has watched his patients get sicker and sicker during the last four years, while officials waffled over whether his area was too polluted for humans. His 11-year-old daughter suffers from an enlarged thyroid, one of the most common ailments of children living in contaminated areas.

"We will all die young," said Vera Khanchirina, 54,

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Anna Yelistratenko, evacuated from Byelorussia's Chudyany village, revisits radiation-contaminated home.

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Chudyany's schoolhouse, used for four years after Chernobyl accident, now is empty. Gas mask was to protect workers sent to decontaminate the village school.

4 Years Later, Chernobyl Clears a Distant Village

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who was evacuated to a newly built settlement a few miles down the road at the beginning of this year. "My head hurts, my bones ache—especially in my fingers and my legs. My abdomen hurts, too. Doctors say it might not be radiation, but I didn't have these problems before the accident," she said.

About 70 percent of the nuclear fallout from Chernobyl scattered over the neighboring republic of Byelorussia, and particularly its southeastern regions of Mogilev and Gomel. Chudyany is one of only two villages in the Mogilev region to have been relocated since the meltdown of Reactor No. 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear plant on April 26, 1986.

According to the official count, 31 people were killed in the accident. But the Chernobyl Union, a recently formed public organization that gathers its own data, says about 300 died in the explosion, fire and from nuclear fallout.

About 116,000 people living within 18 miles of the reactor were relocated shortly after the disaster. But Soviet officials—backed by scientists—told other residents whose homes were peppered with radioactive particles that they could live safely as long as they took precautionary measures, such as eating only uncontaminated food. With these words of reassurance, even people who initially fled their homes in southeastern Byelorussia returned.

Only last fall, after new findings on permissible tolerance levels, evacuation plans were drawn up for an additional 100,000 people from more distant areas.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Soviet passed a \$26 billion program to resettle up to 200,000 of an estimated 4 million people living on contaminated land. A 24-hour teletthon to raise money for Chernobyl victims raised about \$120 million, the organizers said.

Doctors who study patients in the zone say there are dramatic increases in anemia, heart attacks, enlarged thyroid glands, skin and other cancers, miscarriages, genetic mutations, birth defects, gynecological problems and general lowering of immune systems. Children and pregnant women suffer most. Medical problems are aggravated because expensive equipment for diagnosis and treatment is not available in the region and must be imported from other areas.

One of the biggest problems is stress caused by fear of radiation, which cannot be seen, heard,

tasted, smelled or felt, said Mikhail Kachanov, a leading doctor in the Mogilev region.

"All I can think about is radiation and my family's health. Each day I try to think of how I can possibly get out of here to save my children," said Valentina Pohekuna, 35, a worker at the same collective farm, who has two young sons.

The level of radiation at Chigryai's collective farm is five times the maximum allowable, according to the republic's current standard. Despite the resettlement policy, the government has not yet relocated any families from Krasnopol. Many people—especially teachers, doctors and other specialists—have left on their own. But thousands of others are stuck waiting while the government builds a new collective farm in a clean region.

"We need it today. We can't live this way any longer. We don't have any teachers, there's no one to work in our stores. Our children live as though they are living in a prison. They can never go outside to play. We know it's impossible to keep living here. But we keep living here because there's no place for us to go," said Chigryai, his voice quaking with emotion.

It is very difficult for Chernobyl victims to relocate without government help, both because of an acute nationwide housing shortage and because people in other regions fear they bring radiation with them.

Living in the zone is worse than being in prison, residents say. The government tells them not to go into the forests, pick berries or mushrooms, swim, fish or eat the food they grow in their own gardens. But people living in affected areas acknowledge they cannot keep to this ideal.

"Of course we eat our own vegetables. I still pick berries and mushrooms in the forest for myself and my children," said Lena Lukashenko, 32, a farm worker who lives at another contaminated collective farm in the Mogilev region. "They say the kids shouldn't swim, but kids are kids and of course they swim."

Children in the zone are taken away from the area, and their parents, during school vacations. People are even afraid to have children, so abortions are on the rise because there is a shortage of birth-control measures.

"How can they live where it's forbidden or at least discouraged to make love and give birth?" said Vasily Leonov, first secretary of Mogilev's regional Communist Party.

Leonov and other Byelorussian officials and

scientists disagree with some of their counterparts in Moscow who still claim people can live in areas with radiation levels up to 40 curies per square kilometer. A curie is the measure of radiation in the environment. The new Byelorussian policy says people should be relocated from areas with radiation levels of more than 15 curies per square kilometer or where they cannot live normal lives. It is dangerous to farm areas with more than 5 curies per square kilometer.

Continuing the programs necessary to protect people in radiated zones over the 28-year half-life of cesium-137 would be twice as expensive as moving them out, Leonov said.

The resettlement effort is proceeding slowly because of shortages in building materials and the plodding pace of the workers. Officials in the Mogilev region say 5,500 people will be relocated from 47 villages this year.

Even if the goal is met, it will only succeed in transplanting about half of the people from areas contaminated with at least 40 curies per square kilometer and leaving tens of thousands of people in less contaminated but still hazardous areas.

Many doubt the government can meet its goal. It has not completed any homes at the site chosen for total resettlement of Krasnopol. Katya Gorbacheva, 42, and her husband, Nikolai Gorbachev, 40, who is not related to the Soviet president, already have moved to the new area, called the Dribinsky district.

"The building is going very slowly," Gorbacheva said. "We need thousands of homes, and look how few are built." She pointed to a cluster of small houses built by workers from the collective farm, not the government.

Her family did not leave earlier, she said, partially because Communist Party officials threatened to strip party membership from those who left.

Viktor Gushcha moved recently from Krasnopol to organize the development of the new settlement, but his wife and children are still in the zone.

"By the third day, I was already sleeping better. It's such a psychological stress to live where the rivers, forests and even your own garden are off bounds. Once you leave, you immediately feel better," said Gushcha; the new first secretary of the regional Communist Party committee in Dribinsky.

Despite the hope the new construction brings, there is an underlying fear that the damage already has been done to the health of the people slated to move in.

"My biggest fear is that this new settlement will become one large hospital," Gushcha said.