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The April, 1986 Chernobyl disaster produced both short and long-term health, safety, economic and political consequences that are very much evident today. I welcome this Briefing today as an opportunity to focus attention on that tragedy and what remains to be done by the countries immediately concerned and the international community to deal with the safety and maintenance of the Chernobyl plant, study the long-term health effects on those exposed and manage the health, psychological and economic effects on the affected populations.

I served as the United States Ambassador to Belarus from 1994-97. By that time, almost ten years had passed since the accident, but Chernobyl was very much a critical issue for the government of Belarus. As is known, the prevailing wind patterns at the time of the explosion carried much of the radioactive debris into Belarus, primarily in the south-eastern regions. Approximately twenty five percent of the agricultural land of Belarus was contaminated and closed off and most local residents either fled or evacuated under Soviet government orders.

When we arrived, we were warned not to eat domestic berries, mushrooms, or dairy products out of concern for contamination. I saw for myself while visiting the “closed zone” and heard many stories about the social, psychological and economic effects for those forced to leave their land and relocate to sterile urban housing blocs. There were repeated reports of former residents sneaking back to their homes and of displaced persons from around the former Soviet Union and even from Asian countries attempting to seek refuge in empty houses in the restricted zones. An estimated twenty percent of the Government of Belarus budget was devoted to health care, pensions, relocation and subsidies for those exposed to the radiation. There was a good deal of money expended on research of the long-term effects of radiation exposure, particularly on children for thyroid cancer, but many questions remained unanswered. Not surprisingly, fear of the unknown often buttressed by a lack of transparency and objective information from government officials significantly added to the difficulty of the affected population in dealing with the tragedy.

US Government humanitarian assistance efforts were also well in train by 1994 but complications were evident. When the accident happened, Belarus was part of the USSR and we are all familiar with the far less than transparent and forthright way Soviet authorities dealt with the accident in its initial phase. This was brought home to me shortly after my arrival when one of the US Embassy drivers told me that he and several friends had been mobilized right after the explosion to work at Chernobyl but were given no briefing on what had actually happened or the potential risks involved.

I will not go into detail on the then and current serious political differences the US has with the Government of Belarus but I will mention that the health care and emergency assistance structures of the Belarusian government dealing with Chernobyl during my tenure were very reminiscent of their previous Soviet counterparts. The Ministry of Health and a special coordinator for emergency situations were principally responsible for dealing with the consequences and coordinating foreign assistance but their methods of operation were all too familiar to a veteran of service in the former USSR such as me.

What then did the United States do to try to help the situation? According to the Department of State, the Department's humanitarian aid programs have delivered and distributed some \$235 million in humanitarian commodities to the neediest populations of Belarus. This was accomplished in 39 airlifts and 1,030 surface shipments utilizing \$13 million in Freedom Support Act funding. The commodities included medicines, medical supplies and equipment, food and clothing. A significant amount of this assistance, especially the medicines, went to treat the victims of Chernobyl.

On April 28, 2006, the State Department will fund an air shipment to Belarus of essential medicines marking the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident. This airlift will be conducted in coordination with two US private volunteer organizations, Heart-to-Heart International and CitiHope International. These medicines will specifically target Chernobyl victims.

The above-cited figures do not include donations by private individuals, assistance provided by US non-governmental organizations and research funded by the National Institutes of Health. Some of the medical aid and equipment provided during my time in Belarus came from US Army facilities in Germany as bases there were being downsized or closed after the end of the Cold War. On at least one occasion, a whole hospital complex was packed up and shipped to Belarus. The US Embassy was responsible for helping choose the recipient and ensuring delivery of the equipment and supplies to the end user working in conjunction with a US non-governmental organization which made most of the arrangements. NIH was conducting several studies on the health impacts of the radiation exposure, particularly on children. It was recognized that this type of tragedy could conceivably recur elsewhere and it was imperative, therefore, to study the effects of radiation exposure on the population.

How effective was this aid and how did the Belarus government and population respond? Ten years out, it is difficult for me to evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts. At the time, I can say our aid was appreciated and deemed useful. Major aid deliveries and the airlifts received some publicity in the mostly government-controlled Belarusian press and certainly the Belarusian medical community was aware of our programs. Contacts with average Belarusians consistently revealed appreciation and awareness of US aid programs.

That said, arranging aid deliveries through the Belarusian government was frequently time consuming, frustrating and complicated by petty bureaucracy. Not unlike other countries in the former USSR, customs officials tried to collect customs and duties on aid

shipments but were deterred by stiff demarches on our part. An effort to donate two ambulances was almost cut short by difficulties raised by mid-level bureaucrats. Publicity in the government press for our aid efforts was eventually given, but often our sense was that this was done only because of our insistence. It must be noted that these aid deliveries came against the background of a worsening bilateral US-Belarusian relationship due to our grave concerns about Belarus' commitment to democracy, economic reform and respect for human rights. US policy has been that the provision of humanitarian aid should not be affected by the state of the political relationship with the particular country. Thus, our humanitarian aid went forward even as we were redirecting economic assistance away from the central government and focusing on efforts in the regions to build civil society and the rule of law. This friction, compounded by the already-mentioned difficulty of dealing with a Soviet-type bureaucracy, meant that even humanitarian aid deliveries were cumbersome and difficult to arrange.

As for the success of the Belarusian government's plans and programs, this is a matter that still needs a good deal of study. Recent reports such as by the UN have examined this question and I certainly defer to their expertise. My own conclusions are based on my observations and discussions with non-Belarusian health care professionals who came to Belarus either to conduct research or as care givers. Credit is given for the relatively large amounts of the national budget devoted to Chernobyl. That said there was much less confidence that the programs were always based on careful and objective study of their effectiveness but rather that more depended on political connections with the Ministry of Health. Small payments have been continued to many exposed to the radiation but are these really helping and are there more effective alternatives such as creating new, non-agricultural based industries in some of the less contaminated areas so that these people could regain a livelihood? All too often, I heard that foreign assistance givers were viewed primarily as cash cows and that programs were begun simply because the money was available from them not because of demonstrated need. And to a fearful and poorly informed population, it has become the norm to base physical complaints such as colds on the Chernobyl accident when there may not be any reason to do so. This is a devilishly difficult situation for any government to manage given its unprecedented nature, but there is a clear need today in Belarus for objective study of the long-term health effects, more transparency and objective evaluation of current programs and more open and willing cooperation with foreign assistance givers and researchers.

Another part of Soviet history seems to be repeating itself in Belarus. In many parts of the Soviet Union, it was "green" movements that first gave political voice to opposition forces. Forming a political party in opposition to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was anathema so reform-minded groups focused on environmental degradation and grandiose but damaging projects for dams, reversing rivers etc. as a safe mechanism to express opposition. Leaders of these green parties then took leadership roles when national political organizations were created in several republics as the USSR was falling apart. The Belarusian opposition as well as the government is now preparing for the April 26 "Chernobyl Way" demonstrations in Minsk to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Chernobyl. For the opposition, it will be a test of their ability to mobilize numbers of people to continue their demonstrations for democratic change in Belarus.

As an informed observer of Belarusian affairs, David Marples, recently wrote, “Chernobyl Way” will this year take on a political hue, particularly since the government has begun to re-cultivate the contaminated regions and has restricted independent inquiries into the long-term health effects of the accident in the republic. My strong hope is that this anniversary remembrance will indeed lead to more openness and objective study. The people of Belarus exposed to the radiation have suffered a great deal and deserve no less.