



Declining donor support may jeopardize Red Cross Red Crescent Chernobyl thyroid cancer detection programme

On the 19th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident and with Chernobyl-related cancer rates predicted to peak from 2006 to 2020, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is warning that Chernobyl must not become a forgotten disaster. The Federation expressed its extreme concern that funding trends for 2006 and beyond will not allow it to continue life-saving screening for thyroid cancer in affected areas of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia and that it was essential the programme be sustained for the next 15 years.

"Our funding will reach critically low levels at the end of 2005, while the trend in thyroid cancer cases continues to increase", notes Warwick Inder, the International Federation's head of delegation in Minsk. In the contaminated region, rates of thyroid cancer are about 16 times higher than before the disaster, on April 26, 1986. The Federation and the three Red Cross societies of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia need urgent funds to continue their Chernobyl Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation Programme (CHARP).

According to the United Nations about seven million people in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia continue to live in highly contaminated areas. The number of cancer cases - especially of the thyroid gland - keeps growing. Experts expect the rate of thyroid cancer will peak between 2006 and 2020. "The effects of the Chernobyl disaster will persist for years to come," underlines Inder.

Established in 1990, CHARP, the Federation's longest-running humanitarian operation, provides medical screening for thyroid cancer to people who were aged 18 and under at the time of the accident as well as appropriate follow-up support. In recent years funds have come from the Netherlands, Japanese and British Red Cross Societies.

"Our six mobile diagnostic laboratories (MDL) last year screened 90,000 people and detected almost 44,000 thyroid abnormalities," explains Inder. "Some 12,300 people were referred to national medical authorities for more exams or treatment. Thyroid cancer was confirmed in 215 of these patients. Year on year, thyroid cancer cases have almost doubled since 2000."

At the same time, the Red Cross continues to improve its early detection capabilities. For example, the Brest MDL in Western Belarus can now conduct on-the-spot 'fine needle' biopsies in the field on suspected cases of thyroid cancer.

In 2004, MDL specialists as well as Red Cross workers and volunteers provided psychosocial support to about 17,500 people. Meanwhile, distributions of multivitamins by the Red Cross have helped to strengthen the immunity of about 35,500 children.

Since its inception in 1990, CHARP has assisted more than three million people, screening almost 600,000 and providing millions more with medicine, multivitamins, information and psychological support. This last element may be the most crucial, stresses Inder. "We are screening healthy young people with their whole life in front of them. Imagine what it's like to be told that something that happened 20 years ago could one day kill you".

Web link to the Chernobyl appeal : http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf_appeals.pl?annual04/018104ar.pdf

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The Federation, the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. For further information on Federation activities, please see our web site: www.ifrc.org