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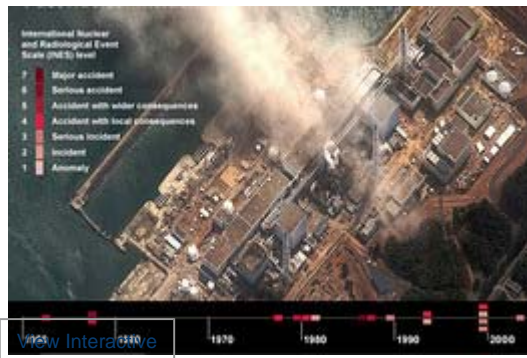
# Chernobyl Survivors See Parallels in Crisis

By JAMES MARSON

KIEV—Sitting in his office in downtown Kiev, Yuri Andreyev has been glued to news of the widening crisis at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

"You worry that the same thing is going to happen there as with us," sighed the jowly 60-year-old, whose gray hair is receding atop a furrowed brow.

### Past Nuclear Incidents



Mr. Andreyev was an engineer working at the Chernobyl power plant on the night a reactor exploded on April 26, 1986, spewing a radioactive cloud across Northern and Western Europe in what remains the world's biggest nuclear disaster.

"I just hope the nuclear plant workers there get lucky and manage to prevent the accident getting worse," said Mr. Andreyev, who lost a number of friends in the blast during a test that went awry. "These people are my colleagues, so of course my first thoughts are about them."

The threat of meltdown at the Japanese plant—already ranked the second-worst nuclear accident in history by the French nuclear-safety authority—comes as Ukraine is still dealing with the impact of the Chernobyl blast as it approaches the 25th anniversary.

Mr. Andreyev said the problems at Fukushima are unlikely to reach the scale of the Soviet disaster, which he said released 30 tons of nuclear fuel, causing radiation 10,000 times as high as what has been recorded so far around the Japanese plant.

Chernobyl, unlike the more-modern Japanese facility, had no containment structure to block any radioactive release in the case of a meltdown.

Even so, the physical, financial and psychological burdens that persist in Ukraine offer an insight into what Japan could face.

The defunct plant is still surrounded by an zone too contaminated for people to inhabit. The government is urgently trying to raise €600 million (\$837 million) to fill a funding gap to replace the unstable shield that covers the reactor with a more-durable structure.

The number of deaths and long-term health problems connected with Chernobyl is much disputed. Around 30 people, mostly rescue workers, died in the immediate aftermath. A 2005 study by United Nations agencies said that a total of 4,000 people could eventually die of radiation exposure from Chernobyl.

Other nongovernmental organizations and scientists cite much-higher figures for deaths connected with Chernobyl, with some estimates as high as one million, and they say the U.N. has ignored or played down studies into widespread health defects.

On Thursday in Japan, the number of emergency workers battling the Fukushima crisis—caused after the plant was swamped by a tidal wave following a massive earthquake—was increased to more than 300 from 50 because some of the workers had reached their radiation-exposure limits despite working in short shifts.

However great the cost in lives of the Chernobyl accident, one of its most powerful legacies for Ukrainians has been psychological. The U.N. study said the people from affected areas were gripped by a "paralyzing fatalism," in part because of a lack of information about the effects of radiation.

Among those most affected by the accident were the thousands of "liquidators" who dealt with the explosion's aftermath.

On Wednesday, around 200 of them gathered outside the main government building in Kiev to protest proposed changes to a law that they say threatens to cut their benefits.

"Looking at the pictures in Japan, I am filled with pain and sympathy, as well as memories," said Oleh Honcharov, a 42-year-old former lieutenant whose first assignment was the cleanup at Chernobyl.

The operation involved bulldozing whole villages and wooded areas, which had been contaminated with radiation, before burying them beneath several feet of earth.

The exclusion zone surrounding the plant can now only be visited with government permission. The city of Prypyat, which used to house 50,000—mainly plant workers and their families—is now an eerie ghost town.

Ukraine's government in December announced plans to officially sanction tourist trips to the zone, which have already been operating on a small scale for several years.

The main Lenin Street is lined with crumbling buildings overgrown by grass and trees. The buildings are largely empty after looters struck following the evacuation of the town in the 36 hours after the accident.

A fairground with a Ferris wheel and bumper cars that had been set to open one week after the blast lies unused and rusting.

At the plant itself, work has started on a huge new shelter the size of two football fields and the height of the Statue of Liberty. The shield will replace the current sarcophagus, hastily thrown up in the months after the explosion, which is becoming increasingly unstable.

Despite hundreds of millions given by international donors, the €600 million funding gap remains, and the Ukrainian government has called a donor conference for April.

As Japan faces the consequences of its own nuclear accident, those involved in the Chernobyl cleanup said one crucial advantage it has over the Soviet authorities, which tried to hush up news of the accident, is openness.

"I am sure an accident of that scale could only happen in such a closed society of the Soviet Union," said Ihor Gramotkin, the current Chernobyl power-plant director.

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