

The United Nations and Chernobyl



[Home](#)

Documents

- + [General Assembly Documents](#)
 - + [ECOSOC Documents](#)
 - [Reports of the UN Chernobyl Coordinator](#)
 - [Press Releases](#)
 - [National Reports](#)

Conferences and Meetings

[UNDP Goodwill Ambassador](#)

[Projects](#)

[Partners](#)

[20th Anniversary](#)

[Reference Materials](#)

[Key Events](#)

History of the United Nations and Chernobyl

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, 26 April 1986 - A routine 20-second shut down of the system seemed to be another test of the electrical equipment. But seven seconds later, a surge created a chemical explosion that released nearly 520 dangerous radionuclides into the atmosphere. The force of the explosion spread contamination over large parts of the Soviet Union, now the territories of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. According to official reports, thirty-one people died immediately and 600,000 "liquidators," involved in fire fighting and clean-up operations, were exposed to the high doses of radiation. Based on the official reports, near 8,400,000 people in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine were exposed to the radiation, which is more than the population of Austria. About 155,000 sq. km of territories in the three countries were contaminated, which is almost half of the total territory of Italy. Agricultural areas covering nearly 52,000 sq. km, which is more than the size of Denmark, were contaminated with cesium-137 and strontium-90, with 30-year and 28-year half-lives respectively. Nearly 404,000 people were resettled but millions continued to live in an environment where continued residual exposure created a range of adverse effects.

No reports were released until the third day after the Chernobyl explosion. Then, Swedish authorities correlated a map of enhanced radiation levels in Europe with wind direction and announced to the world that a nuclear accident had occurred somewhere in the Soviet Union. Before Sweden's announcement, the Soviet authorities were conducting emergency fire fighting and clean-up operations but had chosen not report to the accident or its scale in full. No established legitimate authority was able to immediately address the situation and provide answers for questions such as: Is it safe to leave the house? Is it safe to drink water? Is it safe to eat local produce? Communicating protective measures early would also have most likely enabled the population to escape exposure to some radionuclides, such as iodine 131, which are known to cause thyroid cancer. Early evacuation would have helped people avoid the area when iodine 131 is most dangerous, 8-16 days after release.

During the first four years after the Chernobyl accident the Soviet authorities decided to largely deal with the consequences of the explosion at a national level. Without Soviet support, the United Nations and its partners sought ways to provide emergency support, which included assessing the nuclear safety and environmental conditions of the contaminated area, and diagnose the various medical conditions that resulted from the accident. The UN also focused on raising the awareness of the area's inhabitants, teaching them how to protect themselves from radionuclides found in the environment and agricultural products.

Many count the year 1990 as a crucial point in the United Nations involvement in the Chernobyl recovery. The Soviet Government acknowledged the need for international assistance. As a result, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 45/190, which called for "international cooperation to address and mitigate the consequences at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant". This Resolution also entrusted one of the [Under-Secretary-General](#) with the task of coordinating the Chernobyl co-operation and called for the formation of an Inter-Agency Task Force. The Quadripartite Coordination Committee, which consists of ministers from Belarus, Russian, Ukraine, as well as the United Nations Chernobyl Coordinator, became part of the coordination mechanism at the ministerial level. In 1992, a year after the Task Force was established, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, which came to be called the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) in 1997, began to coordinate international cooperation on Chernobyl. To expedite financial contributions towards the Chernobyl activities, the Chernobyl Trust Fund was established in 1991 under the management of OCHA. OCHA began to manage a range of diverse tasks and responsibilities from strategy formulation and promotion to resources mobilization, advocacy and channeling donors' contributions. Since 1986, the United Nations organizations and major Non-Government Organizations and Foundations have launched more than 230 different research and assistance projects in the fields of health, nuclear safety, including the construction of the [Shelter](#), socio-psychological rehabilitation, economic rehabilitation, environment and production of clean foods and information.

Over time it has become clear that the task of environmental and health recovery cannot be separated from the task of development. In 2001, UNDP, and its regional director for the three affected countries, became part of the coordination mechanism for Chernobyl cooperation. In the following year, the United Nations announced a shift in strategy, with a new focus on long-term developmental approach, as opposed to emergency humanitarian assistance.

In 2004, UN Secretary General's decision was announced transferring coordination responsibility from UN OCHA to UNDP as part of shift in strategy based on 2002 study "The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery". In the course of assuming coordination responsibilities, UNDP has identified three priority areas to pursue on Chernobyl:

1. Information provision, including on promotion of healthy lifestyles
2. Community-based social and economic development
3. Policy advice, aimed at helping governments rationalize Chernobyl spending

In order to clarify remaining issues, and maintain worldwide attention on Chernobyl, the United Nations has undertaken a number of new initiatives. The Swiss-funded Chernobyl website [Chernobyl.info](#) serves as an independent forum on Chernobyl. The Chernobyl Forum, initiated by IAEA, is aimed at generating consensus on a range of disputed issues and reviewing all the scientific evidence on the impact of the Chernobyl accident on human health and the environment. [GreenFacts summarises Chernobyl's Legacy Report](#) findings provided the reassuring message about the impact of low-dose radiation. They will be used by UNDP as source material in efforts to ease fears of the affected populations and provide useful advice on how to live and work safely in the region. The [International Chernobyl Research and Information Network \(ICRIN\)](#), initiative launched by OCHA and SDC, is carried out by UNDP focusing on information dissemination to the Chernobyl-affected communities and popularizing healthy lifestyles. The first phase of ICRIN - information needs assessments - had already been completed by UNDP Country offices in Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine.

[Contact us](#) | [About](#) | [UNDP Homepage](#) | [UN Homepage](#)