CHERNOBYL FALLOUT

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Marc Nerfin, President of the International Foundation for Development Alternatives, writing in the *IFDA Dossier* raises many of the fundamental issues brought into foo us by the Chernobyl disaster.

Chernobyl, a name unheard of until the April 26 nuclear blast in Ukraine, has become the code name, in the North, for our nuclear vulnerability, but its meaning cannot be limited to the North. Of the 383 reactors currently in operation, 23 are in the Third World (six each in India and Taiwan, four in South Korea, two each in Argentina and South Africa, one each in Brazil, Pakistan and Yugoslavia); of the 118 units to be completed by 1990, nine are located in the South (four in South Korea, three in India and one each in Argentina and Brazil). The dangers in the Third World are growing with its share.

Chernobyl offers the world several urgent lessons. First, it is the worst, but only the latest in a series of nuclear accidents. In the US, the most widely known is that of Three Mile Island (1979), but there were many more, from Idaho Falls (1961) to Gore, Oklahoma (last January) through Detroit and Savannah River, South Carolina (1966); Okonee (1972); Palisades (1973); Decatur, Alabama (1975); Erwin, Tenessee (1981); or Ohio and Califonia(1975). The number of accidents has increased every year since 1979, reaching 2,974 cases last year (20% more than in 1984); there were 601 emergency shut downs in 1985. The UK never stopped having problems and accidents with the Windscale/Sellafield plant (300 occurrences in 30 years, including the 1975 fire which destroyed a reactor), as a result of which 39 people died of cancer by 1983, and four alerts in seven weeks this

year. There were also accidents in Italy (Trino, 1967), Switzerland (Lucens, 1969) France (Choos, 1968; St Laurent, 1969 and 1980), Japan (Tsuruga, 1981) and Argentina (Cons tituyentes, 1983). In 1984, the French narrowly escaped a major accident at Bugey, near the Swiss border. In Spain eight accidents were reported at Almaras over the last twelve months. And the Russians themselves had accidents at Obninsk, Kyshtym (1957), Novovoronej (1969), Shevchenko (1974), and certainly others. The Americans are now concerned that 'the Chernobyl plant had enough of the advanced safety features of US reactors to raise questions about the effectiveness of plant designs in the United States'.

All this points out that nuclear energy is unsafe in its present operations. Further, no one can say with any certainty what may happen when existing plants are decommissioned, and no one knows how much it will cost (estimates range from US Dollars 50 million to Dollars 3 billion per reactor).

The risk is so obvious that the US nuclear industry is reported to be 'on its death bed', having received no contract for the last eight years. Its Swiss counterpart is not much better off. In Europe there were only nine new orders in 1985, and none in either the UK or Western Germany since 1981. In 1983, Spain adopted a moratorium on new plants and 'paralyzed' five existing ones. As a result of Chernobyl, the Netherlands have now halted the expansion of nuclear power; the City Council of Trino, in Northern Italy, has ordered the suspension of work on a new nuclear site; the Yugoslavs have abandoned plans for a second reactor at Prevlaka near Zagreb; Finland has postponed the decision on whether to build a fifth reactor; Sweden, which had already decided to phase out all nuclear reactors by 2010, may shut down some of them before that deadline.

Second nuclear clouds ignore national borders. The Chernobyl cloud has affeted the whole of Europe, and the EEC banned (two weeks after the accident) all imports of fresh food and milk products from locations within a 1,000 km radius of Chernobyl. Full human health implications are still unknown, but economic damage has been estimated at US Dollars 50 million in Poland, Dollars 150 million in Italy, Dollars 460 million in West Germany.

Third, the nature of the nuclear energy leads governments to violate, more than in other cases, the people's right to be informed. The Kremlin has been rightly condemned for failing to inform immediately its people and other European countries. In France, where the nuclear lobby is strong and the ecological movement weak, the government waited for two weeks before making public that radiation was sometimes 400 times higher than normal. The French press itself, before accusing the government of lying, was silent for one week. But Washington does not have a better record. In 1954 when it exploded its first deliverable hydrogen bomb on the atoll of Bikini in the Pacific, producing an unexpectedly high level of radiation, which still affects many people, it took ten days to acknowledge the fact. And this was only after a US marine wrote to a newpaper. In contrast, one may mention that in Italy, three weeks after Chernobyl, the newspapers still report daily on the level of contamination of foodstuffs.

Fourth, as usual, people are ahead of governments. Demonstations have taken place against nuclear power all over Europe; in Athens, in Britanny, in Lucerne, in Munich, in Rome, at the French-German border, in Yugoslavia, and even in Poland. In Western Germany, 60% of the people are against new plants (and 54% want existing plants to be phased out), as are two thirds of the Finns, three quarters of the Americans, four fifths of the Italians. In the UK, according to the industry itself, only 40% of the British still want nuclear energy, and 70% of the Dutch are opposed to it. In 1978, the majority of Austrians voted against the starting of an already built Dollars 500 million reactor at Zwentendorf. The Danish Parliament requested, early in May, that the Swedish plant at Barseback (40 km from Copenhagen) be closed down. Fifth, the Third World, a usual dumping ground for dangerous products, from drugs to pesticides, banned in the North, is now more threatened than ever. The crisis in the nuclear industry in the North will make it look for new markets in the South. Since governments are no better in the South than in the North, nuclear Bhopals will necessarily follow.

Finally, whatever its huge costs in human terms (100,000 persons in the USSR will have to be subjected to medical checks for the rest of their lives), Chernobyl is not Hiroshima, but they cannot be disassociated. Chernobyl is also a dramtic reminder of the nuclear apocalypse's permanent threat.

The lessons from Chernobyl are clear. The Faustian bargain of nuclear energy has been lost. It is high time to stop building nuclear plants, to decommission existing ones and to speed up research to avoid the risks for future generations - and to ban nuclear weapons. This is the price to pay to enable life to continue on this planet. It is an urgent task for people's movements to force governments to act in this direction, and to hold them accountable if they do not.