

Man Inside Chernobyl Praises Japan

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VIENNA — Japan's reaction to its nuclear crisis has been swift and responsible, said the only survivor of a four-man group that entered the Chernobyl site after it was covered with a concrete hood.

It would be wrong to blame Japan for not offering enough information directly after the Fukushima accident, said Anatoly Tkachuk, a senior official at Chernobyl when its No. 4 reactor blew up in 1986, causing the world's worst nuclear accident.

"Think about it this way, a nuclear object emitting radiation after an explosion or accident — you can't even get close to this object. Every man would die from the intense radiation," he told a news conference in Vienna on Tuesday.

"If you want to go in and assess it, it would mean victims that die. So I think that the Japanese showed the best national characteristics. The nation pulled together, reacted quickly, and I think this protected the country from panic."

Tkachuk was responsible for the safety of the so-called "liquidators" who battled to stabilize Chernobyl after it blew up 25 years ago. He was in Vienna to present his book "I was in the

Chernobyl sarcophagus."

Once authorities finished installing the "sarcophagus" over the wrecked site eight months after the accident, an order came from Moscow to report on the situation inside the shell.

"Robots could not go in because the inside was completely destroyed and pathways were blocked. It had to be people," Tkachuk said. He clambered into the site with three other men dressed in chemical suits, gas masks and thick goggles.

"The chances of coming back were slim. We had already said goodbye to the world," he said in rapid Russian, describing himself as scared but somewhat proud to carry out the mission.

One big worry was that the high level of radiation inside the sarcophagus had already started to destroy the concrete.

"We immediately saw dust had fallen onto the floor. The walls were already starting to crumble," Tkachuk said. The site was gloomy and damp, and smoke swirled in the air.

"There were wave-like movements in the air, the air was even moving by itself. It was awful," he said.

"We immediately felt pain in the throat — the first sign of a high radiation dose — and headaches, pressure in the head, very painful joints, especially the knees."

A temperature of up to 60 degrees Celsius and high humidity made it hard to breathe. One man in his group died almost at once from the radiation and the two others died days later.

Tkachuk says he must have unwittingly avoided parts of the site containing very high radiation and did not step on deadly reactor fuel that had been scattered by the explosion.

"People knew it was dangerous but didn't really know what they were doing. At the beginning, people were moving radioactive material around with their hands," he said.

The official short-term death toll from the accident was 31, but many more died of radiation-related sicknesses such as cancer. The total death toll and long-term health effects are a subject of intense debate.

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