

Chernobyl Anniversary Observed

April 26, 2012



Viktor Yanukovich **Denis Grishkin**

KIEV — Ukraine’s president vowed Thursday that his country is committed to building a new, safer shelter over the damaged Chernobyl reactor as Ukrainians, Belarussians and Russians marked the 26th anniversary of the world’s worst nuclear disaster.

President Viktor Yanukovich was to take part in a ceremony inaugurating the initial assembly of a gigantic steel arch to cover the remnants of the exploded reactor.

The arch — weighing 20,000 tons and big enough to house New York’s Statue of Liberty — is due to be completed in 2015, when the delicate and dangerous job of dismantling the reactor and cleaning the vast amounts of radioactive waste can begin.

The April 26, 1986, explosion spewed a cloud of radiation over much of the northern hemisphere, forcing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes in heavily hit areas of Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia.

A shelter called the “sarcophagus” was hastily erected over the damaged reactor, but it has been crumbling and leaking radiation in recent years, and a new confinement is necessary.

Yanukovich said in a speech to the nation Thursday that 2 million people, including cleanup workers and children, have been hurt by the tragedy and that it was the state's obligation to protect and treat them.

"Chernobyl still evokes pain and is remembered today," Yanukovich said. "That is why we continue to take care of the safety of the shelter over the destroyed fourth reactor."

But the reassurances fell flat with some Chernobyl cleanup workers and victims, with about 2,000 protesters staging an angry rally outside parliament, demanding an increase in compensations and pensions.

Yanukovich also thanked international donors for pledging \$980 million for building the new shelter and a spent nuclear fuel facility.

"In this undertaking Ukraine feels the friendly shoulder of the majority of countries in the world," Yanukovich said.

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