

Hasty Evacuation Haunts Belarus' Chernobyl Survivors

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Grigory Deichik weeping at his wife's grave at a cemetery in the 30-kilometer exclusion zone around Chernobyl. **Vasily Fedosenko**

KHOINIKI, Belarus — The sudden switch by Soviet authorities from calm reassurance to evacuation alarm is etched on the memory of Makar Krasovsky and others like him, 25 years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Despite a swirl of rumor about the extent of the explosion at the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine on April 26, 1986, three days went by before Moscow announced the catastrophe in a terse, cryptic communique.

Meanwhile, a long tongue of radioactive debris from the destroyed No. 4 reactor, driven by a southeast wind, licked across the neighboring Soviet republic of Belarus.

Today, the Belarussian border region from which Krasovsky and others were evacuated in 1986 is a weird, overgrown wilderness — teeming with wildlife but virtually devoid of people, its shops and homes fast disappearing under a tangle of foliage.

The same fate could be in store for parts of Japan's northeast coast if technicians do not succeed in averting meltdown at reactors in the quake-crippled plants at Fukushima.

As much of the Soviet Union relaxed in pre-May Day holiday mood in 1986, a frantic, unpublicized disaster control operation was under way not just at Chernobyl itself but in Belarussian border villages such as Khoiniki and Pogonnoye.

"They were telling us to go on working and not to panic. American radio was saying something, but it was being jammed. Music was playing — so everything was OK," said Krasovsky, 73.

"But we could see for ourselves the military trucks moving around and helicopters overhead as if there was a war on," said Yevgeny Kravchenko, then a young student who had gone to visit his parents in Khoiniki.

"You had to be an idiot not to realize that something extraordinary had happened," said Kravchenko, who now heads the zone's administration.

When the evacuation order came in early May for Belarussian villagers living within a 30-kilometer radius of Chernobyl, the mood changed in an instant and they were told to just take some cash with them and get out fast.

Most went and did not return.

"Police, soldiers, went through the village with sirens, shouting: "Move out! Move out!" It was terrible. They just stuck whoever they could find in buses," said Krasovsky, who was hurriedly evacuated from his village of Pogonnoye.

As people moved out, teams moved in to exterminate domestic pets and livestock.

"A special brigade shot dogs, poisoned hens, geese and ducks. They killed everything and left behind what they had killed. I went back in on May 18 or 20. There was a terrible stink, stench and flies. It was awful," Krasovsky said.

The nuclear drama in Japan has brought memories of the Chernobyl disaster, the world's worst nuclear accident, flooding back for Belarussian evacuees.

Next month, Ukraine will host an international conference in Kiev aimed at galvanizing the world community to stump up \$600 million in extra cash to help build a new protective shield to cover the stricken Nuclear Reactor No. 4 to contain radiation.

In terms of territory affected by radioactive material and perhaps in terms of loss of life, Belarus suffered more even than Ukraine from the Chernobyl disaster.

About 23 percent of its territory was affected by radioactive fallout, according to Belarussian figures.

About 24,000 people were evacuated from a rural area covering about 215,000 hectares, changing the character of a tranquil, picturesque spot.

As in Ukraine, official estimates in Belarus differ wildly over the number of victims that the Chernobyl disaster has claimed. Estimates of victims from Chernobyl-related cancer range from scores to almost 100,000.

One Belarussian researcher, Vasily Nesterenko, attributes a sharp rise in the incidence of cancer to the fallout. Pre-1986, there was a ratio of 82 cancers per 100,000 people in Belarus, but this had risen to 6,000 by the end of the 1990s, he says.

Today, an exclusion zone along a large section of the border with Ukraine is practically devoid of people, apart from some old people and hunters, and has been reclaimed by nature.

Officially termed the Poleski "radiation-ecological preserve," it is closed to visitors most of the year and open only on one day in early May for an Orthodox festival when Belarussians remember their family dead.

Well-tended cemeteries, maintained by local hunters, contrast with deserted and overgrown village homes and shops.

Grigory Deichik, 82, made a trip to his home village of Lomashi six months ago to bury his wife, Sofia, and expects to be buried alongside her there when the day comes.

Wildlife has made a comeback in the absence of people, and the area is full of deer, elks, wild boar and packs of wolves.

"The people have gone and nature has reclaimed its own," said Grigory Sysa, a local hunter and guide. "Where there were fields there are now swamps. Forest has taken over where there were villages before."

The village of Tulgovichi, which once had about 1,000 inhabitants, is still home to a handful of pensioners who have stubbornly resisted moves to get them to leave and live on in an overgrown wilderness.

Ivan Shamenok, 86, who buys food like his neighbors from a visiting mobile shop, believes the threat was exaggerated.

"I didn't budge. I figured that if I was done for it was for the Motherland. But it turned out that others who went off, they were the ones who died and I am still alive. They were afraid and I wasn't," he said.

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