

## Chernobyl effects still felt – Ukraine struggles to heal wounds 20 years after nuclear accident

*Yushchenko has it right. Chernobyl points to the reliability and safety of this sixty-year-old technology. Greenpeace has killed more people than Chernobyl.*

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**Professionally paid Greenpeace activists** rally in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Wednesday as they mark the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion.

Ukrainians paid homage Wednesday to the victims of the Chernobyl disaster while continuing to grapple for ways to live with the legacy of the world's worst nuclear accident, restore contaminated land and give hope to survivors.

Arriving by helicopter at the shuttered Chernobyl nuclear power plant for commemorations of the catastrophe's 20th anniversary, **President Viktor Yushchenko said Chernobyl should be transformed into a beacon of hope, and he urged that nuclear energy not be feared.**

"Chernobyl must not be a mourning place; it must become a place of hope," Yushchenko said.

That will be difficult in a nation where Chernobyl's emotional wounds remain raw.

There is intense disagreement over the health, environmental and social tolls two decades after the electricity-generating plant's Reactor No. 4 exploded during a pre-dawn test on April 26, 1986, spewing radioactive clouds over the western Soviet Union and northern Europe.

Bringing red carnations and flickering candles to Chernobyl memorials around the country, Ukrainians repeated a common mantra: It can't be allowed to happen again.

"Let God not make our grandsons relive this," Valentyna Mashina, 55, said at a memorial in Chernobyl, a town 11 miles from the plant where 4,000 people still live – but for no more than two weeks at a time, to work.

The shattered reactor, which spewed out radioactivity for 10 days, contaminated 77,220 square miles and forced the Soviet government to permanently evacuate more than 300,000 people.

A report from the U.N. health agency estimated last week that about 9,300 people will die from cancers caused by Chernobyl's radiation. Some groups, such as Greenpeace, insist the toll could be 10 times higher.

About 5 million people live in areas where radioactive particles fell in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, and a U.N. report last year found that many suffer from a deep sense of gloom about the future.

Now, with experts saying radiation levels have fallen significantly in some areas, the United Nations is turning its attention to returning life to the region.

Yushchenko said his government supports this move, and he has called for scientific studies to determine how the land could be used.

Among the ideas is using land to store Ukraine's used nuclear fuel and creating a nature preserve that would take advantage of a wildlife resurgence in the zone that had to be abandoned by humans. Some have also floated the idea of promoting Chernobyl as a tourist destination.

But before any rehabilitation can begin, the plant first must be secured, Yushchenko said. The concrete-and-steel sarcophagus hastily built to entomb Chernobyl is crumbling and dotted with holes. Birds have found their way inside, and radiation has escaped.

A \$1.1 billion internationally funded project to replace the sarcophagus remains on the drawing board.

"The environment does cleanse itself," said Igor Linge, a Russian atomic energy expert at a conference in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital. "But there are some areas, of course, that will remain contaminated for hundreds of years, maybe even thousands. ..."

Critics contend the damage from Chernobyl is being played down to restore faith in atomic energy at a time when the world is hunting for alternatives to oil.

Yushchenko has expressed interest in nuclear energy as a way to reduce Ukraine's dependence on its former master, Russia, for natural gas supplies. The priority, he told state television, has to be prolonging the 15 reactors that Ukraine already has.

"It sounds paradoxical, but nuclear energy is the world's safest," Yushchenko said. He added, however, that it was too early to talk about new reactors in Ukraine.

Anna Golubovska-Onisimova, head of the Ukrainian environmental group MAMA-86, said at an environmental conference during the anniversary that environmentalists would aggressively fight plans for new reactors.

"Ukraine doesn't need nuclear reactors. Hasn't Chernobyl taught us anything?" she asked.

Environmentalists say Ukraine should focus instead on energy-saving technologies.

They argue the country's vast farm lands should be used to produce biofuels - something Yushchenko suggested could be done on land around Chernobyl. Ukraine could also use its wind resources, particularly in the Crimea, to harness natural energy, environmentalists say.