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# Truth about Chernobyl

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Sometimes, even good news is difficult to accept. In the case of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster nearly 20 years ago, it shouldn't be.

In April of 1986, Reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine exploded, unleashing plumes of radioactive particles in the air. The reactor core continued to spew its contaminants for 10 days until the fire was put out. The wind carried them over wide rural stretches of what used to be the Soviet Union. There were dire warnings of a medical and environmental catastrophe and a pall was cast over the entire nuclear power industry.

It turns out that the effects of the nuclear accident -- the world's worst -- were not nearly as cataclysmic as some had predicted. That good news is contained in a report of the Chernobyl Forum, a panel of more than 100 experts brought together by the United Nations and representatives of affected countries. The report says that so far, there are only 59 known fatalities (50 rescue workers who received extremely high doses of radiation and nine children who contracted thyroid cancer). Ultimately, the report says, as many as 4,000 of the roughly 600,000 people who were subjected to radiation in the most-affected regions could die from radiation-induced cancer and leukemia, but that is only an estimate. In any case, says Tomihiko Taniguchi of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is a far cry from the "vast exaggerations -- in press coverage and pseudoscientific accounts of the accident -- reporting, for example, fatalities in the tens or hundreds of thousands."

It's important to get the numbers and the health effects right. The report does not diminish the seriousness of the accident, the social upheaval in its aftermath or the suffering of those who received the worst radiation exposure. But it maintains that the greatest health problem arising from the accident is continuing mental trauma brought on by fear of radiation and by unnecessary evacuation from areas with low, lingering background radiation. Millions of people in what are now Russia, Ukraine and Belarus still receive some kind of Chernobyl benefits which, the report says, have "undermined the capacity of individuals and communities concerned to tackle their own economic and social problems."

Predictably, the report is being attacked by environmental groups such as Greenpeace, which called it a "whitewash." Norway's Bellona environmental foundation suggested the Chernobyl Forum's goal is merely to improve the image of the nuclear power industry. But healthy skepticism has no room for conspiracy theories that undermine the work of the forum, whose goal is to focus aid efforts on the most highly contaminated areas and to redesign government programs to help those still genuinely in need.

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