

Going nuclear? Think again

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TWO decades ago last week, the world witnessed its worst nuclear disaster at the Ukraine nuclear reactor site, Chernobyl, then part of the Soviet Union.

Twenty years on, the environment is still contaminated, especially in the so-called "exclusion zone", 30km around the plant.

This includes plants, animals, trees, groundwater sources and also hundreds of abandoned vehicles, ranging from Soviet-made Lada cars to helicopters that were used to fight the blazing reactors.

Today, they are the unofficial monument to the tragedy that serves as a reminder of what took place, alongside the official one in the shape of the fallen heroes who laid down their lives trying to save the situation.

Foremost were the firefighters, miners, soldiers and the so-called "liquidators" — the emergency workers drafted for the purpose.

It is difficult to arrive at the number of deaths caused by the early explosion of April 26, 1986 when Reactor Four collapsed after a failed safety test.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) says that in the long-term, thousands will prematurely lose their lives due to cancer-related exposure to gamma-ray radiation.



Mutations have already been observed in plants and animals. Leaves are said to have changed shape and some animals were born with physical deformities.

Many inhabitants are still reeling from the fatal impact of the radiation.

One source claims that some three million people suffer from the after effects while hundreds of thousands were forced to evacuate.

In the town of Pripyat, 3km from Reactor Four, about 50,000 left within 36 hours of the incident.

Large territories of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were polluted by clouds of radioactive particles, including plutonium, iodine, strontium and caesium.

Plumes of radioactive debris drifted as far as western Soviet Union, eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Britain as well as the eastern part of the United States.

It has been established that more than 100 radioactive elements were released into the atmosphere.

While most were shortlived, that is losing their radioactivity in a few days, others such as strontium and caesium can last longer with a half-life of 29 years and 30 years respectively.

What's worrying is that tragedies of this nature are usually never transparent. Rather, it is plagued by

"distrust", giving the impression there are attempts to "whitewash" the impact of the event.

In the case of Chernobyl, the authorities were accused of covering up the accident by denying it on state television and radio. People were only evacuated several days after the explosion.

By that time, tonnes of the remaining radioactive gases and nuclear fuel particles in the reactor had been released, while thousands of "liquidators" were exposed needlessly as they joined plant employees in the clean-up work. Many were without adequate protective gear.

There is a dispute over the number of Chernobyl-related thyroid cancer cases. A United Nations study cited only 4,000 cases.

An estimate issued by the Greenpeace environmental activists earlier this month claims there were at least 10 times this number.

A European report entitled "The Other Chernobyl Report" estimated there were 30,000 to 60,000 premature deaths due to the nuclear incident.

A study by eight UN organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme and the International Atomic Energy Agency, concluded that past estimates of a death toll in the tens of thousands were grossly exaggerated.

Instead, the September 2005 study put the number of past and future deaths attributable to Chernobyl at just 4,000. But then again, other organisations say as many as 93,000 people may die of cancer and other illnesses associated with Chernobyl.

Last week, a Greenpeace campaign group released another study by 50 scientists claiming 200,000 lives would be lost, nearly half from cancer.

Moreover, issues such as mass evacuation and displacement, involving anything between five million and nine million people, complicate the assessment.

What seems clear, however, is that the impact of the accident at Chernobyl is far more devastating than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945.

It is said to be 400 times more potent. And the number of A-bomb victims of Hiroshima have surpassed 200,000.

This does not include the intangible impact of Chernobyl, what the IAEA report dubbed as a "paralysing fatalism — negative self-assessment of health, belief in a shortened life expectancy, lack of initiative and dependency on assistance from the state".

Some of these have caused the rates of divorce, alcoholism and unemployment to escalate.

It has been highlighted that the biggest challenge facing communities in the years to come would be the psychological damage.

Today, as the world contemplates new energy policies provoked by the unprecedented high oil price and campaigns for nuclear power stations, the Chernobyl fiasco must figure into the equation.

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