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VIEW

Turning point at Chernobyl

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Chernobyl opened my eyes like nothing else: it showed the horrible consequences of nuclear power, even when it is used for non-military purposes. One could now imagine much more clearly what might happen if a nuclear bomb exploded. According to scientific experts, one SS-18 rocket could contain 100 Chernobyls. The nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl this month 20 years ago, even more than my launch of perestroika, was perhaps the real cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later.

Indeed, the Chernobyl catastrophe was an historic turning point: there was the era before the disaster, and there is the very different era that has followed. The very morning of the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear station on April 26, 1986, the Politburo met to discuss the situation, and then organised a government commission to deal with the consequences. The commission was to control the situation, and to ensure that serious measures were taken, particularly in regard to people's health in the disaster zone.

Moreover, the Academy of Science established a group of leading scientists, who were immediately dispatched to the Chernobyl region. The Politburo did not immediately have appropriate and complete information that would have reflected the situation after the explosion. Nevertheless, it was the general consensus of the Politburo that we should openly deliver the information upon receiving it. This would be in the spirit of the glasnost policy that was by then already established in the Soviet Union.

Thus, claims that the Politburo engaged in concealment of information about the disaster is far from the truth. One reason I believe that there was no deliberate deception is that, when the governmental commission visited the scene right after the disaster and stayed overnight in Polesie, near Chernobyl, its members all had dinner with regular food and water, and they moved about without respirators, like everybody else who worked there. If the local administration or the scientists knew the real impact of the disaster, they would not have risked doing this.

In fact, nobody knew the truth, and that is why all our attempts to receive full information about the extent of the catastrophe were in vain. We initially believed that the main impact of the explosion would be in Ukraine, but Belarus, to the northwest, was hit even worse, and then Poland and Sweden suffered the consequences. Of course, the world first learnt of the Chernobyl disaster from Swedish scientists, creating the impression that we were hiding something. But in truth we had nothing to hide, as we simply had no information for a day and a half. Only a few days later, we learnt that what happened was not a simple accident, but a genuine nuclear catastrophe: an explosion of Chernobyl's fourth reactor.

Although the first report on Chernobyl appeared in Pravda on April 28, the situation was far from clear. For example, when the reactor blew up, the fire was immediately put out with water, which only worsened the situation as nuclear particles began spreading through the atmosphere. Meanwhile we were still able to take measures to help people in the disaster zone; they were evacuated, and more than 200 medical organisations were involved in testing the population for radiation poisoning.

There was a serious danger that the contents of the nuclear reactor would seep into the soil, and then leak into the Dnepr river, thus endangering the population of Kiev and other cities along the riverbanks. Therefore, we started the job of protecting the river banks, initiating a total deactivation of the Chernobyl plant. The resources of a huge country were mobilised to control the devastation, including work to prepare the sarcophagus that would encase the fourth reactor.

The Chernobyl disaster, more than anything else, opened the possibility of much greater freedom of expression, to the point that the system as we knew it could no longer continue. It made absolutely clear how important it was to continue the policy of glasnost, and I must say that I started to think about time in terms of pre-Chernobyl and

post-Chernobyl.

The price of the Chernobyl catastrophe was overwhelming, not only in human terms, but also economically. Even today, the legacy of Chernobyl affects the economies of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Some even suggest that the economic price for the USSR was so high that it stopped the arms race, as I could not keep building arms while paying to clean up Chernobyl.

This is wrong. My declaration of January 15, 1986, is well known around the world. I addressed arms reduction, including nuclear arms, and I proposed that by the year 2000 no country should have atomic weapons. I personally felt a moral responsibility to end the arms race. But Chernobyl opened my eyes like nothing else: it showed the horrible consequences of nuclear power, even when it is used for non-military purposes.

One could now imagine much more clearly what might happen if a nuclear bomb exploded. According to scientific experts, one SS-18 rocket could contain 100 Chernobyls. Unfortunately, the problem of nuclear arms is still very serious today. Countries that have them 9 the members of the so-called ³nuclear club² 9 are in no hurry to get rid of them. On the contrary, they continue to refine their arsenals, while countries without nuclear weapons want them, believing that the nuclear club's monopoly is a threat to the world peace.

The 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe reminds us that we should not forget the horrible lesson taught to the world in 1986. We should do everything in our power to make all nuclear facilities safe and secure. We should also start seriously working on the production of the alternative sources of energy. The fact that world leaders now increasingly talk about this imperative suggests that the lesson of Chernobyl is finally being understood.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the USSR, is chairman of the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow and the head of the International Green Cross.

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