

**Statement by Mr. Kul C. Gautam, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director,
At the International Conference: "20 Years after Chernobyl: Strategy for
Recovery and Sustainable Development of the Affected Regions"
Minsk, Belarus, 19 April 2006**

Protecting Children from the Impact of Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster



Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we heard from my senior colleague Ad Melkert, the Associate Administrator of UNDP, the United Nations system has been a strong partner of the peoples and governments of the regions affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in their efforts to overcome their suffering and rebuild their livelihoods.

Of all the victims and survivors of Chernobyl, our hearts go out to the most vulnerable – the children of the region who have paid the highest price.

This 20th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident is an occasion for us to pay our tribute to the large number of children, young people and their families – the Chernobyl generation – whose suffering touches our hearts and whose resilience inspires us all.

For two decades, the governments, the scientists, public health workers, environmentalists and international organizations have been challenged to respond in a fitting manner to the unprecedented scale and complexity of this disaster.

On behalf of UNICEF, I wish to thank them all – particularly the governments of Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine -- and especially the 600,000 emergency and recovery workers for their heroic efforts to mitigate the worst impact of the disaster.

Although there were many deficiencies in the early response to the disaster, particularly in terms of clear communication to the affected population, we all learned and improved our response over time.

Today the humanitarian crisis has passed, but the continuing problems of health and well-being of children in the affected areas are a matter of serious concern to us.

As the report of the Chernobyl Forum indicated, there are many myths and uncertainties about the health impact of the Chernobyl disaster.

But one thing is absolutely clear – increased incidence of childhood thyroid cancer caused by radioactive iodine fallout has been the most dramatic health impact of Chernobyl.

There are over 4,000 cases of thyroid cancer affecting the “Chernobyl generation” of children.

But cancer is only the tip of the iceberg. Widespread iodine deficiency in the vicinity of Chernobyl and other parts of Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine is leading to a whole generation of children growing up potentially brain-damaged.

Iodine deficiency during pregnancy affects fetal brain development. It is the world’s leading cause of mental retardation. It is a danger to pregnant women and young children.

Even mild forms of iodine deficiency can lower the IQ level of children by 10 to 15 percent, leading to poor performance in school and reduced productivity as adults.

Yet, effectively dealing with iodine deficiency is very simple, and low-cost.

Universal iodization of all the salt for human and animal consumption is the best answer from a public health point of view.

Currently only about 55 percent of households in Belarus consume iodized salt. The figure is even lower for Russia and Ukraine – just over 30 percent.

This means that every year 44,000 children are born iodine deficient in Belarus; 274,000 in Ukraine and a million children in the Russian Federation.

This is an unnecessary, avoidable and tragic loss of human potential.

As we will hear at this conference, it will take many years and huge investments to deal with some of the consequences of Chernobyl.

But to deal with iodine deficiency – to iodize all the salt for human and animal consumption - Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine all have the necessary technology, infrastructure and resources needed.

And from the international community we are ready to help.

Universal iodization of salt is a goal and commitment made by world leaders repeatedly at the World Health Assembly, at the 1990 World Summit for Children, and at the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.

Along with all member states of the United Nations, Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine have made a solemn commitment to achieve this goal.

May I humbly ask, Mr. President Lukashenko, and leaders of the Russian Federation and Ukraine that we mark this 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster with a specific commitment that within this year you will do everything possible in your power – including passing the necessary legislation – to guarantee universal iodization of salt in all 3 countries.

That would be one of the finest gifts you – and we together - could give to the Chernobyl and future generations of your children.

By protecting the health, enhancing learning potential and increasing productivity, elimination of iodine deficiency disorder can contribute measurably to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

These are the goals that today unite us all in a common endeavour for national and international development.

In 2002, UNDP and UNICEF with the support of WHO and UN-OCHA commissioned a report on “The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident – A Strategy for Recovery”.

The recommendations contained in that report have guided the UN system’s response and support to the needs of the peoples and communities of the Chernobyl affected areas.

As outlined in that document, and reconfirmed in the Secretary-General’s latest report on Chernobyl, all of us in the UN family are redirecting our support to foster self-reliance and sustainable development.

The foundations for sustainable development need to be built in the healthy bodies and creative minds of children.

It is they who are going to inherit our world. It is them that we need to protect from the legacy and consequences of Chernobyl.

UNICEF and our partners are working hard to respond to a special kind of mental health problem that afflicts many people – children and adults alike.

The Chernobyl disaster is known to have created symptoms of stress, depression, anxiety and medically unexplained physical symptoms, including self-perceived poor

health. Many people perceive themselves as helpless, weak, lacking control over their future and dependent on assistance from the state.

The untold story here is about the fear of the future, which parents unwittingly transmit to their children.

We are trying to counter this perception by educating children about healthy lifestyles, and optimistic outlook on life.

With this in mind UNICEF is working with other UN agencies to prepare a practical manual on “Facts for Life” to help children and families cope with the consequences of Chernobyl.

With our NGO partners we are collaborating in skills training programmes to prepare youngsters for jobs.

But our best partners in our efforts to empower children, to give them an opportunity to express their feelings and sentiments, are the young people themselves.

I invite you to see how this is done at the opening of an exhibition of photographs taken by children from the Chernobyl-affected areas of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine at the Art Gallery just outside this hall right after this opening session.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Chernobyl disaster has made vast areas of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine unfit for human habitation. This harsh reality of Chernobyl will linger on – in the ground and in the minds of people for a very long time.

But we can and must overcome this legacy by positive actions to unleash the boundless human potential of the younger generation, by investing in children – the children of Chernobyl and the children of the world.

Thank you.