

**Statement by Mr. Ad Melkert, UN Under-Secretary General and UNDP Associate Administrator at the International Conference: “20 Years after Chernobyl: Strategy for Recovery and Sustainable Development of the Affected Regions”, Minsk, Belarus, 19 April 2006**



Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to represent the United Nations Development Programme here in Minsk at this important commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

I would like to share with you today a message of solidarity both in solemn remembrance of the human casualties and vast damage caused by Chernobyl and in profound hope for the future.

The UN is actively engaged in progress to resolve problems faced by Chernobyl communities. We are committed to working together with all the different groups represented here – government officials, scientists and experts, international agencies, civil society organizations, and most of all the affected populations themselves – to overcome the Chernobyl legacy.

It won't surprise you when I say that everyone of my generation remembers where we were, what we were doing, and what we thought when we first heard news of the Chernobyl accident. I come from the Netherlands, and I remember the pervasive sense of fear that was felt everywhere across Europe at the time. It is no exaggeration to say that, once the news spread, this fear united mankind.

My country is a long way from Chernobyl, however. Though many other countries also received radioactive fallout, the suffering caused by Chernobyl was overwhelmingly concentrated in Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine.

The impact was especially severe for Belarus, where huge areas of farmland and forests were contaminated by fallout; tens of thousands of people had to be resettled from the most affected areas; and millions were exposed to low-dose radiation. The affected governments have devoted huge resources to protecting the population from the consequences, but enormous problems persist, even after two decades.

It is in recognition of the suffering experienced by millions of people that the United Nations is present here in Belarus today. We share the sorrow of all those who lost relatives; we recognize that Chernobyl has deeply affected this country, and that for

many residents “normal life” came to a halt with the accident and has not yet resumed, even after two decades.

This year’s anniversary is an occasion to remember the suffering and honor the victims of Chernobyl. At the same time as paying respect to the past, however, we need to take stock of the present and look ahead to the future. In assessing the prospects for recovery from Chernobyl, we see prospects for hope.

An important reason for this is the latest scientific findings on the health and environmental impact of Chernobyl. Last September the UN Chernobyl Forum, a consortium of eight UN agencies and the governments of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, issued its findings. These were based on three years of rigorous study involving 100 of the world’s top scientists on radiation and health – many of them from Belarus.

The research conclusions provided the encouraging message that the overwhelming majority of the five million people living in Chernobyl-affected areas need not live today in fear of radiation. It also found that many territories initially labeled as “contaminated” are now safe for habitation and cultivation.

The Chernobyl Forum findings provide further impetus to the general reorientation of the UN’s work on Chernobyl. Since 2002 we have been gradually moving towards an approach designed to promote social and economic development. The UN’s strategy has three areas of focus: i) community economic and social development; ii) provision of factual and credible information and iii) policy advice. To support this next stage in the UN strategy the United Nations Development Programme has assumed responsibility for UN Chernobyl coordination.

The first area of focus recognizes that a lack of social and economic opportunities is one of the biggest challenges facing Chernobyl-affected communities. To overcome this challenge, we are working with affected communities to help promote the creation of new and sustainable livelihoods.

In Belarus, for example, working through the Cooperation for Rehabilitation programme (CORE), we are supporting training, organizational support, and start-up business assistance. Our efforts have the dual aim of helping to restore self-reliance and self-sufficiency among affected communities. The creation of youth centres and health posts, the expansion of a village school, new connections to gas lines and new entrepreneurship activities can and do contribute to regaining independence, initiative and identity.

A second vital ingredient is factual and credible information which can help citizens to re-energize and re-direct their lives. In part owing to the initial Soviet secrecy about

the Chernobyl accident, many residents of affected areas remain mistrustful of official declarations. It is our sincere wish to share all available information with all those concerned.

Fear of radiation has proved a health threat in itself, given the medical symptoms of stress that affect many residents. Recent sociological studies conducted by UNDP have shown that affected populations are extremely worried about their health and economic prospects. There is a need for accurate information to overcome this fear, on how to live safely in conditions of low-dose radiation, and on healthy lifestyles in general.

This need has guided UNDP and other members of the UN family to focus on information provision with the aim of identifying the questions to which Chernobyl residents most urgently need answers. The science behind Chernobyl Forum will be translated into easily accessible language. Our projects will provide trusted channels for dissemination.

Third, last but not least, the prospects for socio-economic development in Chernobyl-affected communities depend very much on the surrounding policy environment – on sound policies at the local, regional, and central government level. Chernobyl recovery efforts would stand a far better chance of success if national policies encourage individual liberty, promote principles of democratic governance and human rights and facilitate entrepreneurial initiatives, creating new businesses.

The international community stands by the citizens of Belarus to overcome existing obstacles on the road to recovery and we are ready to provide advice at any time on appropriate policies.

In all three of the areas that are the building blocks for the new UN strategy on Chernobyl –community-driven development, information provision and policy advice – we will strive to coordinate assistance to make best use of limited resources. Although Belarus has received some \$400 million in international aid for Chernobyl over the past five years, it is no secret that funding for Chernobyl has dwindled over time. Avoiding waste and duplication is therefore all the more important to focus resources where they are most needed -- and most effective.

We are convinced that the generosity of external donors is not exhausted. What is crucial, however, is that we provide convincing perspectives that problems eventually can be solved and that the cycle of appeals for aid does not have to be repeated.

We are confident that Chernobyl has entered the right development path. It is already showing results in winning fresh support from major donors. More importantly, it is already delivering practical solutions that, applied consistently by all the groups

represented here today, hold the prospect of restoring to millions the “normal life” that Chernobyl so brutally curtailed twenty years ago.

Our sadness at the memory of the past thus goes hand in hand with our hope for the future; the international community staying side by side with the people of Chernobyl.

Thank you for your attention.