

Children's health in Byelorussia under-threat.

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The Pion family will not be able to welcome in their home Marina, a teenage girl from Byelorussia who used to spend every summer in Racine for the last 9 years.

The picture on the left shows Marina holding baby Edward and posing next to Nicolas and Emilie.

In Estrie, 7 or 8 Byelorussians children were scheduled to arrive next week. The Pion family cannot recall a time when Marina Vierashtshugina did not join them for the summer vacations. The members of this large family met the teenager when she was just a child. "We are so upset about it all. We have been welcoming her for the last 9 years. We've been told that this year, it would not happen, we were not given much detail. We will probably try to phone her since we cannot see her this year", tells Rubie Marois, the mom of the family who used to welcome Marina as if she was her own daughter.

The family was expected to pay for all the expenses related to the teenage girl's stay and, in the light of this, Pierre-Yves Pion and his children had organized a small charity event at the local Centre of Arts in Richmond in order to raise sufficient funds to welcome Marina. The whole family got involved in the event. "We really wanted it to work out. We had even collected enough funds for next year's stay", add Mrs. Marois. In Quebec, a total of 30 families will be deprived of the much anticipated visit.

According to the SSET (« Séjour Santé Enfants Tchernobyl »), the Canadian organization responsible for organizing the stay of Byelorussian children in Quebec, their country of origin is situated less than 10 kilometres north of the nuclear power station of Chernobyl and received 70% of all the radioactive fallout. The Byelorussians children are thus growing up in a contaminated environment.

One of the main objectives of their stay in Quebec was to improve their immune system by allowing them to spend some time in a healthy environment. The explosion of one of the nuclear power plant's reactor in Chernobyl happened in 1986.

The Canadian families were advised of the outcome of this issue at the beginning of June, however the news have yet to be broken to the Media, adds Carole Normandeau, president of the SSET. "It's such sad news", she says. "We are going to work hard in September to get all the various groups to mobilize themselves and get both governments together to try to renegotiate. Otherwise the whole programme is in jeopardy.", she points.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson, André Lemay states that Byelorussia was asking for an extremely restricting international legal agreement.

The source of the problem? The Byelorussian government was concerned that some of the welcoming countries had been eager to permanently keep some of the children who would have rather stay in their country of origin. People in Byelorussia got scared that some of the children may not be coming back at all. But Canada had no intentions of going down that route, adds Mr. Lemay.

"The programme would have only benefited the children, there were no problems for us (...) our offers to continue this programme have all been rejected."

For Rubie Marois, it is a certainty that the health of the Byelorussian children will suffer a great deal as a result.