

AFP: Around Chernobyl, alarming frequency of cardiac arrhythmia

From Boris CAMBRELING (AFP)- 24th September 2009

NOVOZYBYKOV- The inhabitants of the area affected by the disaster at Chernobyl, who consume contaminated food either through necessity or habit, suffer frequent illnesses from as yet unknown causes that could be linked to radioactivity.

After the very large number of thyroid cancers and leukaemia in the years following the worst nuclear accident in history, doctors in the contaminated areas in the South West of Russia have highlighted an abnormally high level of cardiac arrhythmia and cataracts.

Novozybkov, the largest town in the area with 42,000 inhabitants should have been evacuated after the explosion in April 1986 of reactor number 4 at the nuclear power station, some twenty or thirty kilometers away in Ukraine.

But since no-one was forced to go, most people stayed.

"The extensive clean-up operation that had been set in motion was never completed because of the fall of the USSR and the period of crisis following it." said Andréi Niebilitso, the deputy mayor in charge of social services.

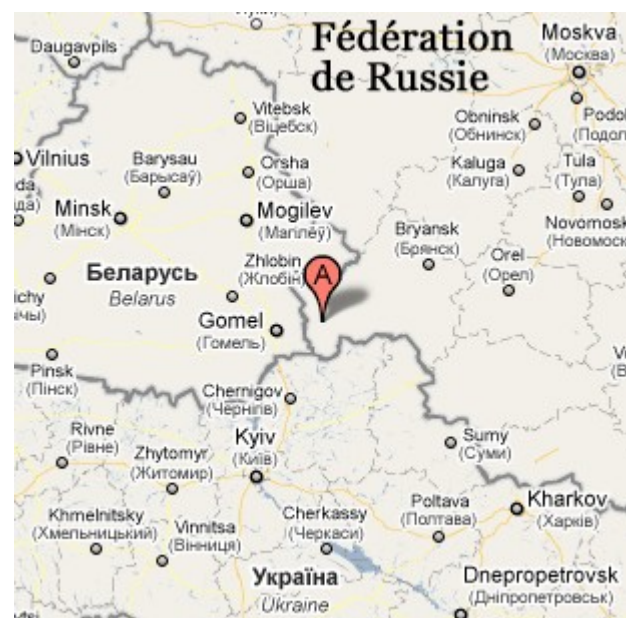
To avoid contact with the radioactive soil, the roads and the school playgrounds were asphalted. But 20 years later, the bitumen is cracking, and the town does not have the financial means to undertake the necessary repairs.

"We would have needed to replace the water pipes, take up a substantial layer of earth" but today with the global economic crisis hitting Russia, "the town is facing its problems alone" says Mr Niebilitso regretfully.

On the pavement, people sell fruit and vegetables from their gardens, as well as berries and mushrooms from the forest, which, together with game constitute the principal source of contamination from Caesium 137, a radioactive element not found naturally in the human body, which is deposited in muscle tissue.



A boy takes a medical examination on September 14th, 2009 at the school of Novyzybkov to find tracks of Cesium 137, 20 years later Chernobyl.



To establish whether there is a direct link between cardiac arrhythmia and Caesium 137 in a patient's body, the French Institute for Radioprotection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN) has set up a programme EPICE (Evaluation of Pathologies caused by Caesium).

Since May, 9000 children living in the contaminated areas, from a total population of 110,000 people on the Russian side, as well as a control group of 9000 other children living close by in areas considered "clean" have been given electrocardiograms, cardiac echographs and have been measured for the level of Caesium 137 in their bodies.

Among children examined one morning at School No 9 in Novozybkov, some showed no sign of Caesium in their bodies, while others had quite high concentrations.

"They've had loads of tests, but we have never seen any results" complains angrily Galina Liakh, headteacher at Lycee No 1 in the town, representing a delegation of headteachers at a meeting with French journalists, on a press tour organized by IRSN.

The teachers confirm that most of the children in the region suffer a variety of illnesses, and they recall studies being undertaken by teams from Germany, Denmark and also America.

This time Alexander Silenok, Director of the Centre for Clinical and Biological Diagnostics and Analysis of Briansk, has promised them that they will be informed of the results every six months, and that the results will be used to improve the care given to those who are ill.

So that the local people do not feel they are being used as guinea pigs in a science experiment “ it was very important that the families gave their agreement, something the Russian authorities have been slow to appreciate,” explains Jean-René Jourdain, in charge of the EPICE programme for IRSN.