

HEALTH

Fukushima , Chernobyl Raise Questions about WHO's Role

By Gustavo Capdevila

GENEVA, Apr 27, 2011 (IPS) - The nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan and the 25th anniversary of the catastrophe in the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine have thrown into relief contradictions in the role played by the World Health Organisation, which civil society organisations have spent years pointing out.

An international coalition of NGOs, *IndependentWHO*, says the multilateral agency has never shown independence in its decisions or actions, in terms of living up to its mandate of protecting the victims of radioactive contamination.



World Health Organisation logo

The groups blame the WHO's alleged inactivity in this area on an agreement it signed in 1959 with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an independent United Nations organisation founded to promote "safe, secure and peaceful nuclear technologies."

The coalition of NGOs states that the agreement makes the WHO "subservient" to the IAEA and prevents the U.N. health agency from "taking any initiative or action to achieve its objectives: the preservation and the improvement of health."

The WHO should break off "that incestuous relationship" with the IAEA, Russian-born Swiss journalist Wladimir Tchertkoff, who has produced seven television documentaries on Chernobyl, told IPS.

But the relationship between the two agencies is unequal, because the IAEA depends on the U.N. Security Council, while the WHO answers to the lower-ranking Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In the May 1959 agreement, the two agencies agreed to work in close cooperation and consult each other whenever either of the two plans to undertake a programme or activity in an area in which the other has a substantial interest. It also establishes restrictions to safeguard the confidentiality of certain documents.

In that framework, "the nuclear lobby has managed to get the WHO to renounce taking care of the victims of nuclear disasters," said Swiss academic Jean Ziegler, currently vice president of the U.N. Human Rights Council's Advisory Committee.

In line with the 1959 agreement, the WHO's position is that "when there is a nuclear accident, we are not responsible for taking care of the victims; the nuclear agency is the sole responsible party," Ziegler told IPS.

He described this as an appalling situation in which thousands of people die, when they could have been saved.

This "renews our suspicion that the nuclear lobby is well-established" here, he said, pointing to the WHO building, outside of which the interview took place.

The latest estimate of the number of Chernobyl victims, published by the two agencies on Sept. 5, 2005, mentions 50 deaths and 4,000 cases of cancer.

IndependentWHO calls such figures absurdly low, because they fail to take into account the health of the children living in the contaminated areas, "where rates of illness are at 80 percent." The statistics also "ignore the fate of the 600,000 to 1,000,000 liquidators," the name given to the veterans of the Chernobyl rescue and clean-up, the coalition statements adds.

Tchertkoff pointed out that the study "Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment", a book translated from Russian that was published in December 2009 by the New York Academy of Sciences, put the total number of people who died as a result of the disaster at 985,000, between the Apr. 26, 1986 explosion of Unit 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear plant and 2004.

According to health data cited by the book, more than 80 percent of children in the areas of Ukraine, Belarus - the Soviet republic of Belarussia at the time – and Russia that were contaminated by Chernobyl were in good health prior to the accident, while "fewer than 20 percent are well" today.

Since Apr. 27, 2007, the organisations grouped in IndependentWHO have maintained a vigil in front of the WHO building in Geneva every working day from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM. The vigil, which consists of one to three activists, is calling for a revision of the 1959 agreement with the IAEA and demanding that the WHO work toward its objective, as outlined in the agency's constitution: "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health."

But Tchertkoff was sceptical. The WHO "cannot do much because it is a victim" of a situation that was created, he said.

With respect to the accident in Fukushima, in northeast Japan, caused by the Mar. 11 earthquake and tsunami, "The WHO doesn't know what to do," he said.

"It doesn't have staff capable of dealing with the situation. It only has five people, just two of whom are university graduates with no experience," he added.

Tchertkoff also mentioned the controversy triggered by WHO policies during the 2009 flu pandemic, in particular with regard to the production and distribution of flu vaccines.

Ziegler said the WHO has been "infiltrated" by the nuclear lobby and the pharmaceutical industry.

He recalled that an independent inquiry set up by former WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland (1998-2003) found that some of the agency's staff had received payments from the tobacco industry while the agency was debating the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which was finally approved in 2005.

Tchertkoff believes there are two different tendencies in the WHO.

One is that if circumstances continue to deteriorate, like over the last few weeks, it will become necessary for the WHO to once again discuss its policy regarding nuclear radiation.

But the other group holds that a reopening of the debate would amount to a confession "that we haven't done anything in the past few decades," he said.

"A serious internal problem of this kind is lamentable at a time when we are looking at Fukushima, Chernobyl and all of the world's nuclear plants, surrounded by some 410 million people living in a radius of 30 kilometres from these danger spots," the journalist said.

IPS, which requested an interview with WHO director of Public Health and Environment María Neira, received no response from the WHO with regard to these accusations. (END)

IndependentWHO

The collective's founding members are Enfants de Tchernobyl, Belaruss, Physicians for Social Responsibility/International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the People's Health Movement, the Commission for Independent Information and Research on Radioactivity, Réseau Sortir du Nucléaire, Brut de Béton Production and ContrAtom.

Agreement WHA 12-40

IndependentWHO says the agreement between the WHO and the IAEA "is a major source of disinformation on the health and environmental consequences of the accident at Chernobyl" and that "WHO must regain its independence completely so that it can investigate the relationship between radiation and health."

"Here are just three examples that illustrate perfectly the way in which the Agreement compromises the independence of WHO:

1. The IAEA is committed, in its statutes, to the promotion of the peaceful use of the atom. It is therefore a commercial lobby group.
2. The IAEA has put itself forward as the body responsible for the setting of safety standards within the nuclear industry as a whole. It is therefore both judge and jury.
3. The IAEA has no mandate nor any expertise in matters of public health."