

## Nuclear Threat Draws WHO and Civil Society Closer

By Gustavo Capdevila

**GENEVA, May 5, 2011 (IPS) - The global health agency and a network of non-governmental organisations opposed to nuclear proliferation have resumed their dialogue, prompted by concern over the effects of the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in Japan and the enduring consequences of the explosion at Chernobyl, in Ukraine.**

Margaret Chan, the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO), met Wednesday with representatives of a group of NGOs who are harshly critical of the United Nations agency's policies on the health hazards of nuclear radiation.

The coalition, "IndependentWHO", presented Chan with demands for the adoption of measures for dealing with possible nuclear accidents like the Mar. 11 events at Fukushima and the Apr. 26, 1986 disaster in Chernobyl, in Ukraine, then a part of the Soviet Union.

Civil society wants to see urgent measures to provide medical care, treatment and adequate protection for the people who live in regions contaminated with radioactivity.

The activists also want WHO and other international agencies to ensure these people have the right kind of food to encourage rapid elimination of radioactive substances from their bodies.

Another of their proposals is the creation of a commission on ionising radiation and health, made up of independent experts, to carry out scientific research on the long-term health effects of the Chernobyl accident.

No member of the proposed commission should have any interests, financial or otherwise, with the nuclear industry or any associations linked with it, the coalition specified, calling for the commission to deliver a report at the 2014 World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of WHO.

The commission should organise working groups devoted to evaluating and describing the gaps that have remained in research on the effects of radiation on health.

The coalition is also requesting the publication of the minutes of conferences in Geneva in 1995 and in Kiev in 2001 about the consequences of the Chernobyl accident. The activists claim the documents have not been released in order to protect the interests of the nuclear industry.

Furthermore, the civil society group is calling for the amendment of the 1959 agreement between WHO and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the world's centre of cooperation in the nuclear field, so that WHO is given full responsibility as the primary coordinating body on issues related to the health effects of ionising radiation.

Ionising radiation alters the physical state of atoms, the electrically neutral component particles of matter, transforming them into ions, which are electrically charged particles. The ions damage the normal biological processes in living tissues.

The coalition's main proposal was distributed to the diplomatic missions of the countries represented in Geneva, but so far no state has volunteered to move the proposal at the next World Health Assembly.

The Cuban government has said it will second the motion if another country takes the lead in proposing it, activist Alison Katz of the People's Health Movement told IPS. The Movement is an NGO network that supports the People's Charter for Health, a declaration adopted by WHO in 1978 at the World Health Assembly held in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan.

Chan reminded the coalition representatives that while WHO can issue health guidelines and standards and promote their adoption by governments, it is up to national authorities to enforce them.

As for relations between WHO and the IAEA, Chan said the two agencies cooperate on issues of common interest in a spirit of mutual respect and autonomy.

She said the IAEA has neither any weight nor any decisive influence on the actions of WHO. But according to Katz, this statement is similar to what was said four or five years ago.

In Katz's view, the meeting between civil society and the U.N. agency was neither a failure nor a waste of time. On the contrary, she said, the meeting with Chan showed that the coalition's actions are having an effect.

The coalition has mounted a protest vigil since Apr. 27, 2007 outside the doors of WHO headquarters in Geneva, carrying placards calling for the agency to reassert its independence from the IAEA.

At the meeting Wednesday, Chan praised the dedication and tenacity of the civil society coalition and promised to keep communication channels open with its representatives.

Chan's decision to meet with the activists' delegation was influenced by the Fukushima catastrophe and by an article by Alexey V. Yablokov, Vassily B. Nesterenko and Alexey V. Nesterenko on the consequences of Chernobyl, published in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.

The figures for Chernobyl accident victims in this report are many times higher than the statistics produced in 2005 by WHO and the IAEA.

Katz said Chan acknowledged at the meeting that she did not believe that the total direct death toll from the Chernobyl accident was only 50, as the disputed WHO/IAEA report claimed. The agencies' report also estimated there could be a further 4,000 deaths from cancer related to the explosion in the reactor.

According to Katz, WHO has never published a correction of the figures in their report, so Chan's admission at the meeting that they are, in her view, mistaken was a matter of major importance.

Summing up the meeting, Katz said this time, in contrast with a previous meeting, the arguments of the civil society representatives were not disputed. "At the previous meeting, all our ideas were contradicted, with a certain amount of arrogance," she said.

This time, instead of arrogance there was a willingness to show interest and concern, Katz said. Chan did not say that she agreed with the coalition, but neither did she dispute its views, she added.