

Memories painful on Chernobyl's 30th anniversary (Update)

April 26 2016, by By Mstyslav Chernov And Dmytro Vlasov



The Chernobyl nuclear plant workers in uniform attend a ceremony to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster at the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutych. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)

As Ukraine and Belarus on Tuesday marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident with solemn words and an angry protest, some of the men who were sent to the site in the first chaotic and frightening days were gripped by painful memories.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko led a ceremony in Chernobyl, where work is underway to complete a 2 billion euro (\$2.25 billion) long-term shelter over the building containing Chernobyl's exploded reactor. Once the structure is in place, work will begin to remove the reactor and its lava-like radioactive waste.

The disaster shone a spotlight on lax safety standards and government secrecy in the former Soviet Union. The explosion on April 26, 1986, was not reported by Soviet authorities for two days, and then only after winds had carried the fallout across Europe and Swedish experts had gone public with their concerns.

"We honor those who lost their health and require a special attention from the government and society," Poroshenko said. "It's with an everlasting pain in our hearts that we remember those who lost their lives to fight nuclear death."

About 600,000 people, often referred to as Chernobyl's "liquidators," were sent in to fight the fire at the nuclear plant and clean up the worst of its contamination. Thirty workers died either from the explosion or from acute radiation sickness within several months. The accident exposed millions in the region to dangerous levels of radiation and forced a wide-scale, permanent evacuation of hundreds of towns and villages in Ukraine and Belarus.



A woman stands near a memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutysh, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutysh was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutysh. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)

At a ceremony in their honor in Kiev, some of the former liquidators told The Associated Press of their ordeal and surprise that they lived through it.

Oleg Medvedev, now 65, was sent to the zone on the first day of the

crisis, to help evacuate the workers' city of Pripyat, less than four kilometers (2.5 miles) from the destroyed reactor. Four days later "I already had to go away from the zone because I'd received the maximum allowable radiation dose. Thirty years passed and I'm still alive, despite doctors giving me five. I'm happy about that."

"My soul hurts when I think of those days," said Dmitry Mikhailov, 56. He was on a crew sent to evacuate a village where residents knew nothing of the accident.



People light candles to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, during a ceremony at the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They

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"They smiled at us. They didn't understand what was happening," he said. "I wish I knew where and how they are now. I just can't forget them."

In Minsk, the capital of Belarus, where the government is bringing farming to long fallow lands affected by Chernobyl fallout, more than 1,000 people held a protest march through the city center.

Belarus routinely cracks down on dissent, but authorities allowed the march.



Ukrainians gather at the memorial to honor the memory of the victims of the

Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)

"Chernobyl is continuing today. Our relatives and friends are dying of cancer," said 21-year-old protester Andrei Ostrovtsov.

The final death toll from Chernobyl is subject to speculation, due to the long-term effects of radiation, but ranges from an estimate of 9,000 by the World Health Organization to one of a possible 90,000 by the environmental group Greenpeace.

The Ukrainian government, however, has since scaled back benefits for Chernobyl survivors, making many feel betrayed by their own country.



Ukrainians light candles at the memorial to the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)

"I went in there when everyone was fleeing. We were going right into the heat," said Mykola Bludchii, who arrived in the Chernobyl exclusion zone on May 5, just days after the explosion. "And today everything is forgotten. It's a disgrace."

He spoke Tuesday after a ceremony in Kiev, where top officials were laying wreaths to a Chernobyl memorial.

At midnight on Monday, a Chernobyl vigil was held in the Ukrainian town of Slavutych, where many former Chernobyl workers were relocated.



Chernobyl veterans bring flowers to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, during a ceremony at the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutych. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)

Thirty years later, many could not hold back the tears as they brought flowers and candles to a memorial for the workers killed in the explosion. Some of the former liquidators dressed in white robes and caps for the memorial, just like the ones they had worn so many years ago.

Andriy Veprev, who had worked at the Chernobyl nuclear plant for 14 years before the explosion and helped to clean up the contamination, said memories of the mayhem in 1986 were still vivid in his mind.

"I'm proud of those guys who were with me and who are not with us now," he said.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin, in a message to the liquidators, called the Chernobyl disaster "a grave lesson for all of mankind."



People light candles to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, during a ceremony at the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They

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Candles and flowers are placed in front of the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripjat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripjat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutych. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)



A man lays flowers to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, during a ceremony at the memorial to Chernobyl workers and firefighters in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutych. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)



Children attend a ceremony to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in the town of Slavutych, Ukraine, early Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when the 4th unit of the plant exploded early hours April 26, 1986. The city of Slavutych was built following the evacuation of Pripyat, the town of the Chernobyl plant workers, which was just 1.5 kilometers (about one mile) away from the plant. Some 50,000 Pripyat residents were evacuated after the disaster, taking only a few belongings. They never returned, and workers and their families now live in Slavutych. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)



Ukrainians hold candles at the St. Michael Church to honor the memory of the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)



Ukrainians hold candles at the St. Michael Church to honor the memory of the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)



Ukrainians prepare to honor the memory of the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, at the St. Michael Church in Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marked the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion. (AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov)



A 1986 file photo of an aerial view of the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine showing damage from an explosion and fire in reactor four on April 26, 1986 that sent large amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere. Telling the story of Chernobyl in numbers 30 years later involves dauntingly large figures and others that are even more vexing because they're still unknown. (AP Photo/Volodymyr Repik, File)



A soldier places portrait photos near the monument erected in memory of the victims of the Chernobyl explosion in Ukraine's capital Kiev, Ukraine, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Ukraine marks the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which spread radiation over much of northern Europe. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)



Belarusian liquidators, veterans of the Chernobyl, bring flowers to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster at the memorial in Minsk, Belarus, Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Commemorative events are going to be held later Tuesday outside the Chernobyl power stations as well as in Belarus and Russia, neighboring countries that also suffered from the fallout. (AP Photo/Sergei Grits)

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