

To:

European Commissioner for Crisis Management
European Commissioner for energy

Brussels, 17 April 2020

Subject: Fires in the "exclusion zone" around the Chernobyl power plant – a European response is needed.

Dear Commissioner Janez Lenarčič,

Dear Commissioner Kadri Simson,

Forest fires started on 4 April in the heavily contaminated area of Poleskoye, some 50 km west of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Within days, further outbreaks developed in the "exclusion zone", a 30 km radius around the Ukrainian power plant, which was the scene of the worst nuclear accident in history in 1986.

On Tuesday 14 April, the Ukrainian authorities finally announced that the situation was under control. More than 400 firefighters and rescue workers were mobilized, and three helicopters and three planes dumped 538 tones of water into the area. The authorities were reassuring, while observers say that the fires were larger than Ukraine's official estimates.

According to the NGO Greenpeace¹, this is the worst fire ever seen in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, with almost 39 000 hectares affected. Based on satellite images, Greenpeace claims that the fire is only about 1.5 kilometers from the shelter covering the reactor that exploded in April 1986. According to CRIIRAD, NASA satellite images updated on April 14 suggest that the fires were within a few hundred meters of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant².

These fires raise important nuclear safety issues that need to be monitored with the utmost attention. A fire near to a nuclear facility is always a risk. Fires result in the release of radioactive particles from soils and trees. As the Criirad Association points out³, fires can re-suspend in the atmosphere caesium-137 (and probably also plutonium and strontium-90) accumulated in biomass. The radiological effects of these fires can strongly affect the food chain and the groundwater. In addition, wind can carry smoke and contaminated ashes to new areas, eventually dispersing the radioactive contamination. Finally, peat and dry wood can cause new fires in the so-called "Red Forest", an area of ten kilometers around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, which remains one of the most contaminated areas in the world.

¹ <https://twitter.com/greenpeaceru/status/1249630206366752775>

² https://www.criirad.org/actualites/dossier2020/2020-04-14-9_CPCRIIRAD_Incendies_Tchernobyl.pdf

³ http://www.criirad.org/actualites/dossier2020/2020-04-10_CPCRIIRAD_Incendies_Tchernobyl2.pdf

Full transparency is needed and we call on the European Commission to take up the matter. The radiological effects of these fires need to be investigated further, particularly bearing in mind that there are still several thousand people working in the exclusion zone and some even living there.

- Is the European Commission aware of the measures taken to assess the radiological risks for the population exposed to smoke potentially contaminated by radioactive substances?
- Is the European Commission setting up cooperation to study the effects of these fires, particularly on the food chain, water and the safety of nuclear installations?
- What measures are being taken on the concentration of radioactive substances in the air, the so-called activity concentration, expressed in Becquerels per cubic metre (Bq/m³)?
- Is the monitoring of potential radioactive fallout in the Member States of the European Union coordinated and known?

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Data on the radioactivity of airborne dust in ambient air were previously collected and available at European level on the EURDEP platform⁴, which is now no longer functional. It is now impossible to quickly find recent global data on caesium-137 activity in the air of European countries potentially located in the fire plume. This difficulty in having access to precise measurements had already been denounced in the context of ruthenium-106 detection in the atmosphere in autumn 2017⁵.

It is important to have more precise measurements to accurately assess the risks to the people in Ukraine and to help them provide basic health care and clean food. We were contacted by local associations and Professor Yuri Bandajevsky, who has been studying for many years the effects of chronic radioactive contamination on the inhabitants of Ivankiv, some 50 kilometres from the accident reactor. They warn us that houses are on fire in the villages of the Polesky district. Caustic radioactive smoke is affecting adults and children in all the villages of the Polesky district, in particular Rakovka, Lugoviki, Radyнка, Marianovka, Maksimovichi, Markovka. The village of Wilcza has been completely burnt down. There are 600 children in this disaster area who really need help. **We call on the European Union to set up an emergency aid program to evacuate the children from this disaster zone to safe territories of Ukraine and to send food, water and milk free of radioactive elements, fruits and vegetables, vitamins and trace elements to enable the body to function under extreme conditions, as well as basic medical devices (including masks).**

⁴ <http://eurdepweb.jrc.ec.europa.eu/EurdepMap/Default.aspx>. A new link has been set up but the latest published analysis data is from 2011.: <https://remap.jrc.ec.europa.eu/Routine.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.michele-rivasi.eu/assets/uploads/2017/11/Letter-MEPs-Ru-106.pdf>

The Chernobyl nuclear accident is not over. Today, 4 million people are still living in areas known to be contaminated. The European Union must continue to invest in programs aimed at improving the living conditions of people in the contaminated areas around Chernobyl. Its program set up in 2018, which the Greens have followed closely, was a success: the re-equipment of the hospital of Ivankiv, a greenhouse to produce healthy food and an incinerator to burn radioactive wood from the exclusion zone.

In view of the many forests that are still contaminated and the risks of the spread of radioactivity caused by the fires, we call on the European Commission to extend these kind of preventive and monitoring measures and to set up a genuine program to prevent potentially catastrophic wildfires inside the exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl's ruined nuclear power plant. An automated fire detection and monitoring system, new incinerators and new fire-fighting and forestry equipment are needed to guarantee safe management of Chernobyl's forests.

Hoping Commission's quick action on this urgency, we thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

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