

Episodes from My Experience in Belarus

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Prologue

The damage of Chernobyl is always described through the collection of different numerical data such as the number of migration, the number of children diagnosed with thyroid cancer and so forth. Systematically, it is essential to keep collecting, analyzing and reassessing these numbers. However, it is merely one side of the damage. It is necessary to try and look at Chernobyl with a more extensive perspective, otherwise we could never really understand the damages brought by the Chernobyl's disaster.

When I visited Belarus, I stayed at a health resort for Chernobyl's children in Minsk. Occasionally I met some people from foreign NGOs who visited the facility for few days for the purpose of investigations on the circumstances of these children. Afterwards and similar with all previous visitors they simply were satisfied with expressing the persisting sufferance of these children from the effect of radiation and then superficially they described the beauty of children's eyes. This behavior reminded me of my own experience when I first visited Belarus. I can say that our attitudes were exactly alike. I also had a preconception in my mind of what Chernobyl should look like and I only was able to see things from a unilateral perspective. Therefore I could not see or deal in depth with this disaster. I believe at that time it was a mere confirmation of my own expectations.

Since 2004 I have visited Belarus for three times and in total I have spent in Belarus more than half a year. Since I have a passion for photography, I decided to teach the children staying at the facility how to take pictures. I also visited contaminated areas, met the local people, performed some interviews and took many photos. Hereinafter are three selected episodes that I decided to share from my own experience while I was



A scene of a classroom. At a school in Vetka, Gomel province.

staying in Belarus 20 years following the Chernobyl accident.

Episode 1: Children

There were some impressive places while I visited schools in Belarus. One is a school in Vetka village in Gomel provinces where many villages of the neighborhood became deserted. A teacher said before I entered a classroom "In the next moment, you'll see what the nuclear accident brought to this region in 20 years."

It was a familiar scene that the electricity of the schoolhouse went off. But, I felt the classroom was the most cavernous in any schools I had seen. The number of children was extremely little compared with the size of the classroom. I embraced them with talking and looking into the eyes of the children who cannot hide their curiosity and shyness; while they touched their hair and shoulders and walked between the desks.

I noticed through touching each of the children that there were children, who have not set their viewpoints, who had language-disorder issues, or squirmed and kept moving their hands and foot. Such children came a lot to the institution where I stayed in. The most anxious thing for me was the boy who stared me with kind shy eyes, showing a wrinkly face like an old man because of his dry skin. The symptom of the boy was the same as a 17 years developmentally-disabled girl who is a member of family I stayed in. I had never seen a child who has such a face in Japan and Belarus either. I met two children of the same symptom in this small village.

These children live quietly without being viewed as a victim by the damage of the problem of Chernobyl. Once again, the number of these children is not included in the data telling Chernobyl. Nobody can delineate "where is the damage area" because the damage is too wide, too long and too deep.

After leaving the classroom, the teacher said, "All the things which you saw now are reality to be accepted and the product of that accident.

Almost all children became weak and they can easily catch a cold. The developmental disorder stands out besides abnormal blood and thyroid, too. We were proud this village had bred a lot of excellent children before. But recently, it was the finest record that I gave a student a silver medal* five years ago. We are very proud of our school which started from teaching at a church in 1888 and having a history of more than 100 years. However, now we have only 160 students, while there were about 800 students in 1985 to 1986. Because a lot of villagers migrated to Minsk and Gomel since the accident happened." Every word of hers resonated deeply with me.

In the schools of Belarus, a gold medal is presented when all subjects are best A, and a silver medal is given when a result is close to a gold medal.

I felt often in disaster-stricken villages that it's difficult for the people to find a piece of hope for the future, although it's easy to find a piece of happy memory from the past. Children should be hope to the future for a region of Belarus where various things are taken over from adults to children routinely, and continued. Though time goes by, adults are looking back on their past with bright eyes how the classrooms were full of students in happy harmonious.



A disabled boy at school (see txt).

Sad time is going by in disaster-stricken villages. A flow of time seems to have stopped from the day 20 years ago without looking the bright hope of a development of the village and continuation.

Episode 2: Story of Natalia

Natalia is a 55-years old woman, who living in Rechitsa, one of the contaminated areas. She felt unease with her body following the 1986 accident. She was always irritated and feeling dizzy all the time. After her visit to the village doctor and following his examination, the doctor informed her that everything looked normal because the size of her thyroid was constant. Then he prescribed for her a medicine that apparently was not working because she lost more than 20 kg in 15years and she did not feel any improvement in her health situation.

In 2001, she asked the village doctor if he could refer her to a more advanced and specialized hospital in Gomel. She felt that her symptoms were resulting from the exposure of the radiation of Chernobyl and therefore she wanted to hear another opinion and receive further examination. Accordingly she went to a well-equipped hospital in Gomel and she took more examinations. The doctor at this hospital has confirmed her fears and it turned out that her thyroid was damaged by the radiation. Fortunately after taking the medicine that was prescribed by the hospital doctor, her situation got much better.

During our conversation she said: “20 years have passed and still our medical capacity in the village is primitive. Their knowledge of the damage caused by radioactivity is still weak. I do feel nothing has changed since the occurrence of the disaster.”

After I explained for her how radiation could affect the human body, she was surprised. According to her, nobody raised their awareness and informed them about these influences. She was stunned by the fact that a foreigner who was visiting from Japan could explain many things that she could not learn from her everyday life in Belarus. She said that even the doctors did not feel the urge to communicate and clearly explain to her what was happening with her thyroid. She felt that even 15 years after the accident the village doctor could not locate the real problem and provide the sufficient medical care.

I do believe that there are many other misdiagnoses like Natalia’s case. Unfortunately these cases are not included in the Chernobyl’s conventional way of performing the research study. Actually we are unaware about their situation and therefore we do not include these victims in the investigation. Simply they are not counted. There could be many others who are still suffering from a misdiagnosis and were not as lucky as Natalia. Therefore we need to perform more investigation to locate these people and to provide them with the necessary assistance and awareness. It is our duty to help each other, and we need to do more.

Episode 3: Ignorance

Human body is continuously affected by radiation if people keep living in contaminated area. That is why, they are included as victims generally. However, during I stay in contaminated area, I found the fact that many people who live there are not realized that they themselves are



With Natalia

one of victims.

In their understanding, they categorized only the people as victims who has physical symptom. They believed that huge amount of radiation affected them at the time, and it is the all result what was brought by Chernobyl I was very surprised because no one did not expect that the problem would come out gradually as symptom.

In some villages, people also told me that their village has been entered into the first stages of recovery program. That is, some of new construction would be started soon by government: water service, sewage system, and communal facilities etc. People dreamed the life with these stuff and they seemed to be so excited. In fact, many people said to me “After the accident, many people left our village. But in few years, the life in this village can be more convenient and then it brings the people back. It means, we can overcome the tragic accident”

Radiation is, by no means to be caught up by five senses, because it works without any smell, taste, colour and so on. On the other hand, improvement of living by facilities is easy to see. As a result, local people have “hope” for bright future with improvement stuff making their daily life better.

Local people still does not have correct information about radiation even 20 years after the accident. When their life will get more convenient and people back to their village as their wish, I am afraid it would make a situation producing new victims.

Conclusion :

For the past 20 years the approach in analyzing the damage of the Chernobyl disaster always depended on numerical data. This methodology is understandable, but it is important to recognize that it does not represent the whole picture of the disaster.

Now more than ever we are in need of innovative ideas to resolve problems that are still persisting and could not be detected through the conventional ways. I think it is necessary at first to try to look at the problem from a wider perspective and with more depth.



With my pupils and interpreter.