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Réseau Sortir du nucléaire > Archives > Revue de presse > **Death of V. Nesterenko. Homage to an exceptional resister**

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Death of V. Nesterenko. Homage to an exceptional resister

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FROM THE ASSOCIATION THE CHILDREN OF CHERNOBYL BELARUS
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Vassili B. Nesterenko (1934 - 25.08.2008)

Vice-president of the French- Belarus association "Enfants de Tchernobyl Bélarus", Vassili Nesterenko has died. Nuclear physicist at the highest level in the Soviet Union, since 1986, he has fought against the disinformation on Chernobyl. In 1990, with the help of Sakharov, he set up the Independent Institute for Radioprotection BELRAD to investigate radioactive contamination and to provide assistance to the affected populations, in particular the children.

On 27 May 2008, he came to Geneva with Alexei Yablokov (environmental scientists) and Rosa Gontcharova (geneticist) to participate in the permanent protest (the Hippocratic vigil) outside WHO, in support of the action of IndependentWHO.

These were his words :

"I would like to say this : for as long as friends support us, we continue to hope that the victims will survive. I am one of the 800 000 liquidators wounded by Chernobyl. These are truly the forgotten men of our countries. Tens of thousands have already left this world, they can no longer talk about all this

again. In the name of the liquidators, I wish you, the permanent protesters holding this vigil, courage and a long life, so that you can stay here until victory. I wish you all the good health that we had, we the liquidators, before we arrived at the reactor. We were young and full of strength. Thank you. ."

These words were a premonition. He was speaking as a liquidator who suffered massive damage to internal organs through irradiation received at the site of the burning reactor. As Michel Fernex, President of LES ENFANTS de TCHERNOBYL BELARUS said :

"For us, Vassily Nesterenko was a friend. We were aware that the BELRAD Institute survived thanks to his dazzling intelligence which allowed him to resist thousands of treacherous attacks against him. Professor Nesterenko was director of the famous Institute of Nuclear Physics of Minsk, when in Ukraine, the Chernobyl reactor exploded. He decided there and then to work for the protection of the populations and in particular for the health of the children, victims of chronic irradiation. He has devoted his life to this. In doing so, he neglected his own health and too often, refused rest when this was desperately needed"

Vassili Nesterenko was working on an Atlas of radiocesium accumulated in the bodies of children of the contaminated regions using all the data collected since 1990 from his radio- protection work. He is undoubtedly a unique witness of the consequences of Chernobyl. It is vital that Nesterenko's work continue. The Independent Institute of Radioprotection BELRAD must continue the work of this great, selfless and courageous man, who devoted his life to the pursuit of truth and struggled to repair and limit the human damage of the world's worst nuclear catastrophe.

Life journey of an exceptional resister :

In the hours following the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986, a man rebelled against the lies of the state and paid the price in terms of his career and his own personal safety. Member of the Academy of Sciences in Belarus, physicist at the highest international level, Vassili Nesterenko had access in the Soviet Union to the towns which were out of bounds for military reasons. Chernobyl rocked his life. Svetlana Alexievitch recounts⁽¹⁾ how during a conference of Soviet experts, he spoke up to emphasize the urgent necessity to evacuate the population in a radius of at least 100 kilometers, and to distribute dosimeters and iodine tablets to save the children" (2). Confronting the inaction and lies of the Soviet government, in a gesture of extraordinary courage, Nesterenko decided, without the approval of his superiors, to stop the ongoing scientific work that he directed at the Institute of Nuclear Energy in Belarus. Instead, he put all his staff to work on the health effects of Chernobyl and he developed assistance policy for affected populations. Of course, he was removed from his position and suffered pressure from the KGB. He escaped two attempts on his life.

In 1990, with the help of Andrei Sakharov, A. Adamovitch and A. Karpov, he set up the Independent Institute of Radioprotection, BELRAD, to provide assistance to the children of the areas affected by radioactive fallout. He trains doctors, teachers and nurses in radioprotection.

In 1994, with the help of Western NGOs, BELRAD acquired mobile chairs for whole body measurement of radioactivity, which Nesterenko then improved and perfected. These spectrometers measure radioactivity in the human body and are hooked up to a computer which records the gamma rays of incorporated radionuclides, mainly caesium 137 but also potassium. The data collected are regularly published in a document which is distributed to national, regional and local health authorities as well as to families.

In 1996, Nesterenko succeeded in obtaining approval of, and implementing an intervention based on apple pectin. This intervention is recommended by the Ukraine Ministry of Health as an adsorbent of

caesium 137. In one month of treatment, the level of radionuclides in the organism of a child can be decreased by 60-70%.

Nesterenko was the only scientist taking systematic measurements of artificial internal radiation. His measurements have revealed contamination levels that are 8 times higher than those published by the Belarus Ministry of Health, which persistently obstructed his activities. As his work was legal, these efforts failed. For years, BELRAD has functioned thanks to international assistance and in particular to France, through financial support from the association, the Children of Chernobyl Belarus, and also France Libertés, Children of Chernobyl . . .

Nesterenko himself has had to battle with the effects of radioactive contamination. He flew over the burning reactor the day after the accident. His health became extremely fragile. Since 2007, harassment from government administration doubled after he refused the offer of directing the construction of the new power station in Belarus. On 25 June 2007, President Loukachenko signed a resolution addressed to Prime Minister Sidorsky which stated "Take all necessary measures to bring to justice the private organization "Institute of Radioprotection BELRAD" and its senior staff, responsible for the violation of laws in the area of radioprotection research and dissemination of research results."

But Nesterenko knew the law. He defended himself with amazing energy. Following exhausting daily controls by the fiscal department of the Finance Ministry, whose mission was to incriminate BELRAD, the department ended up recognizing the excellence of the Institute's work and presented its compliments. But that last battle certainly contributed to Nesterenko finally exhausting his strength to resist.

Fortunately, BELRAD, with more than thirty staff, has built up a solid team which includes Vassili's son, Alexei Nesterenko, who is ready to take over as director and continue to expand knowledge, expose the truth in the face of lies from the authorities and to provide assistance to the children of Belarus who continue to suffer from radioactive contamination.