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Chernobyl remembrance

Visit to the exclusion zone

On Saturday 22 April, Green MEPs and MPs, together with representatives of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, visited the exclusion zone around Chernobyl - there is a wider 30 km zone and a 10 km zone, in which permanent residence is forbidden.

The first stop was the small town of **Chernobyl**, a typical Ukrainian village, now mostly deserted. Around 2-4000 people still live there, including all those still working in the security zone. They work for 15 days then have to move out of the zone for two weeks.

The next stop was the nuclear power plant itself, which is situated 12 kilometres away, including the infamous 'Block IV', where the explosions took place on 26 April 2006, ironically after an unnecessary security test that went awfully wrong. Nobody will ever know how many 'liquidators' the Red Army sent in to stop the radioactive inferno, estimations vary between 500,000 and 1 million. Even less is known how many of them died or became ill as a result of their exposure to such high doses of toxic radiation. A **memorial** to the 'liquidators' in Chernobyl town remembers those "who saved the world". Though the last reactor was closed down in 2000, there are still 3000 people working at the nuclear power plant, living in a completely newly-built city, **Slavutych**. The sarcophagus covering Block IV, which is leaking and on its last legs, looms ominously as one approaches. Plans for a new sarcophagus are finished but quarrels about the financing impeded the start of the construction.

The ghost town of **Pripyat**, which was evacuated three days after the explosion, was also part of the excursion. In 1986 the town, which was built only in the seventies to accommodate the workers at the Chernobyl plant and was a model town for Soviet success, was home to 50,000 people. Today, the once modern streets and buildings of Pripyat are overgrown with trees and other plants.

There are still 50 people living at **Ilnyzy**, a small village within the 30 kilometers zone, despite the fact that it is officially forbidden. Before the nuclear catastrophe, the village was home to 700 people. Around 130,000 people were evacuated from the 30 km exclusion zone, however some of them began to return within one year of the meltdown, most of them are now more than 70 years old.

Finally, the excursion visited the 'machines cemetery', where contaminated lorries, buses and even huge helicopters used during the rescue work, are stored.

Before exiting the security zone, at the **Dityatky** check point, every visitor has to pass a contamination check.

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