SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Statement by Special Rapporteurs on the 40th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster in Ukraine
23 April 2026
Geneva

At the 40th anniversary of the Chornobyl disaster in Ukraine, we call on all stakeholders to mark the tragedy by renewing their commitment to addressing its enduring human and environmental toll, and to applying the lessons of Chornobyl to prevent future disasters.

Four decades after the world's worst nuclear accident, the legacy of the disaster at Chornobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine remains persistent. The accident at the plant, which resulted in the emission of dangerous radioactive elements into the environment, continues to impact the land and undermine the rights to health, life and a healthy environment, among others, of the affected population.

Beyond commemoration, the anniversary represents an opportunity to strengthen collective international efforts to advance understanding, protection and monitoring of the environment, and ensure where possible environmental remediation and long-term control and recovery of the area, and support affected communities.

Managing the impacts and consequences of the Chornobyl disaster have been made far more complex by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces in February 2022. The United Nations Secretary-General described the invasion as "an affront to our collective conscience," and as a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, with dramatic humanitarian and human rights consequences.[1] The occupation of the Chornobyl plant between 24 February and 30 March 2022 has had lasting consequences at the nuclear plant and inside the 30km exclusion zone.

More than four years have now passed since Russia's full-scale invasion which witnessed for the first time in the history of war, a large-scale armed attack on commercial nuclear plants of Chornobyl and the Zaporizhzhia. These attacks and occupations have had severe consequences for nuclear safety and security in Ukraine and directly threaten the human rights of people in Ukraine and throughout Europe.

[1] Remarks of the Secretary-General at the resumed eleventh emergency special session of the General Assembly, 22 February 2023, available at https://ukraine.un.org/en/220466-secretary-generalremarks-general-assembly-emergency-special-session-ukraine. See also General Assembly resolution ES-11/1. By its order of 16 March 2022, the International Court of Justice indicated among its provisional measures that the Russian Federation should immediately suspend the military operations commenced on February 24, 2022 in the territory of Ukraine (see https://www.icjcij.org/node/106135).

International efforts to respond to the Chornobyl disaster are being directly undermined. We are concerned at the drone strike of 14 February 2025, which severely damaged the protective structure of the New Safe Confinement (NSC) at the Chornobyl plant. The New Safe Confinement was funded by 45 nations at a cost of over US$2 billion with a life expectancy of 100 years. It was intended to safely contain radioactive materials and enable the replacement of the Sarcophagus built in 1986 to contain the remains of the reactor that was destroyed in the nuclear accident. The Sarcophagus was designed to last 20 years and is at risk of collapse.

According to multiple sources, the drone strike against the New Safe Confinement was conducted by the Russian armed forces. The drone punctured the outer and inner roof of the Confinement, causing fires that burned for three weeks. As a result, the Confinement is no longer able to function as intended. This is delaying the Sarcophagus replacement and risking release of radioactive contamination from it.

We are seriously concerned at ongoing military activities that affect nuclear facilities and electricity infrastructure in Ukraine. These Russian attacks threaten nuclear safety and increase the risk of serious and lasting environmental and human repercussions from the conflict.

Damage to Ukraine's industrial and energy infrastructure can result in the release of hazardous substances, resulting in long-term harm to the environment and public health risks. The protection of civilian objects is a fundamental obligation under international law.

We implore the international community to take the lessons learned of the Chornobyl disaster and the current nuclear crisis in Ukraine to ensure nuclear safety globally and safeguard the human rights of people at risk. The right to a toxic-free environment is an integral part of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

ENDS

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