

Chernobyl': Bureaucratic Indifference - Forest Fires - Flooding

Our helicopter is heading for the 30 kilometre zone of the Chernobyl' nuclear power station. Today, this is the most dangerous sector in the Ukraine from the point of view of fire hazards. For as before, the place is devoid of habitation.

At an altitude of 200 metres the temperature is thirty degrees Celsius. Our Mi-8 is flying northwards. The outlines of the town have disappeared and the ribbon of the Dymmer highway is faintly visible, along with the Kiev reservoir and Desna ...

At Pirnovo we take on board some smoke-jumpers. Beneath us lie unbroken forests - emerald green and of unusual beauty - but beyond there are burnt-out violet-blue areas caused by flash forest fires that had not been stopped in time. We are crossing the Pripyat' River and approaching the now deserted town of the same name.

Now we are circling above the forest. In the intense heat it is like a powder keg, ready to burst into flames at any moment, even from a splinter of glass that has focussed the Sun's rays. This is why, by a decision of a government committee of the Ministry of the Timber Industry, Ukrainian SSR, on June 6, 1966 a special group was formed to fight forest fires in the 30 kilometre zone of the Chernobyl' nuclear power station. Demanding of constant vigilance are the 114,000 hectares of forest situated in this zone. As half of it consists of young conifers, airborne patrols are constantly in evidence from morning till dusk during the hot summer days. Air observer A. Konyashkin points to where the forest has been particularly severely damaged by radiation. In these places it has taken on a faded red-brown colour. But there is very little left of it. The trees have been cut down and buried, and then covered with a layer of sand. The helicopter does not have the right to leave the 30-kilometre zone until a replacement aircraft arrives. The smoke-jumpers, who had come from Syktyvkar' to help, are in full readiness.