NARRATOR
This is Belarus, a little known former Soviet nation that’s frequently been at the crossroads of conflict between the European great powers.

After Napoleon and the Russian Revolution the Nazi war machine flattened Minsk, the capital of Belarus. In the Cold War era Belarus became a rigid state controlled economy; after the fall of the USSR Belarus briefly experimented with the free market but today it has uniquely returned to an authoritarian regime.

In this week’s Earth Report we see how the World Bank in Belarus is trying to find a way to deal with the country’s most pressing needs by focusing on the fall-out from the Chernobyl disaster and providing new opportunities to earn a living.

Today, Belarus marks the most recent tragedy in its turbulent history - the 15th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine. Seventy per cent of the nuclear fallout landed on Belarus. Belorussians have learnt to be stoical in the face of disaster but Chernobyl is a disaster on a different scale. Future generations will continue to suffer as Belarus struggles to survive with the legacy of high-level radiation contamination.

At the start of the 21st century the international community wants to know how modern science assesses the actual damage caused by Chernobyl to the natural habitat, life and health of millions of people.

Every year a charity called For the Children of Chernobyl, as well as others, pay for thousands of children to go abroad for several weeks of recuperation, clean food and water, free from radiation contamination. According to the World Health Organisation, only 13 - 15% of school leavers may be considered healthy - 40% are chronically ill. In the last 15 years the number of disabled children has tripled and 90% of birth defects are attributed to the effects of Chernobyl.

Tanya
Everything that grows in Belarus is radioactive. Everything is radioactive! The food is radioactive.

Blonde Teacher
The children are going away to Italy to the coast to boost their damaged immune systems - they have thyroid disorders.

Radiation is a kind of dust. If it gets into your lungs, a person can die.

Five year old girl
I’m not sick but I will be. My friends are sick. They cough a lot and some of them have sore throats from the cold water.

NARRATOR
Belarus is a time capsule of old-style Soviet government. Opposition politicians have disappeared, the press is muzzled and teenagers can be executed. Western aid agencies are not prepared any more to lend to a government with such a woeful human rights record. In an environment of deteriorating relations with the international community, the World
Bank has the delicate job of finding a way to get assistance to Chernobyl’s victims and to the would-be entrepreneurs stifled by red-tape.

The man at the sharp end is World Bank team leader, Luca Barbone. He has embarked on a country-wide listening mission to find out how ordinary people see their future.

**Luca Barbone, World Bank**
You have environmental issues, you have public expenditure issues, you have business related, you have relocation - so it’s really a very multidimensional problem. Belarus also has got a bit of a short stick er, er, regarding international aid - they haven’t received anything.

So it’s kind of a moral obligation to help what was indeed a, you know, cross-border catastrophe.

**NARRATOR**
Today Luca Barbone and his team from the World Bank Missions of Ukraine and Belarus are on a fact finding trip to the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. To reach Chernobyl they have to pass through the official exclusion zone - a 30 km radius around the plant. The World Bank entourage must pass through three strict checkpoints to enter the exclusion zone. In reality, the exclusion zone is 2,500 square kilometres - according to the Russian and Ukrainian Radiological and Environmental Committees.

They arrive at the Chernobyl Information Centre Station. The staff here compile scientific data on the continuing impact of the world’s biggest industrial disaster.

This is a map that was secret under Soviet rule, for days the Kremlin kept quiet about the disaster.

Fifteen years on, attitudes have changed here in the Ukraine - the population knows more about the fallout of plutonium, strontium and caesium contaminating more than 160,000 square kilometres in Belarus, the Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

**Guide**
…it’s really low today, yes.

**NARRATOR**
Object Shelter is a project dealing with rebuilding the concrete sarcophagus surrounding Reactor Number Four. It is shielding the planet from 200 tons of nuclear fuel and 10 tons of radioactive dust. Hot particles from the melted core of the reactor contain plutonium which remains fixed in the body and poses the greatest health risk.

**Sergei Kulyk, World Bank**
The mere fact that some of the consequences of Chernobyl will be felt for the next 20,000 years, this really, I mean I can’t - with all the human… we are so dwarfed compared with this tragedy that we see here.

Basically major portion of contamination went to Belarus, and people in Gomel - where I am going tomorrow, basically to meet the NGOs in Gomel - they have exposure which is more
than here. Where we stay here, the people in Gomel might be exposed to higher levels of radiation.

**NARRATOR**
A chain reaction is still possible in Block Four if water reaches the basement filled with radioactive lava from the Chernobyl meltdown. This mass is so highly radioactive scientists are unable to study it at close quarters.

They enter Pripyat, once a bustling town for the privileged workers. It’s now a ghost town. This sophisticated dosimeter records the changing levels and types of radiation. No such tool was available in the early years following the disaster.

As a result Belarussians had no clue about the dangerous levels they were exposed to - accurate figures only began to filter out five years later when the World Health Organisation were given access.

**Luca Barbone**
Well, it’s er very sobering. You, you read about these things, you’ve seen er pictures of course, but you’ve never seen anything like this.

**NARRATOR**
One hundred and thirty five thousand Ukranians were evacuated from the towns of Pripyat and Chernobyl and 73 villages. However, in Belarus, in the path of a lethal prevailing wind, evacuation was slow. The people were not warned to stay indoors. Incredibly, the May Day parades were celebrated as if a reactor explosion had never happened.

One hundred and thirty thousand people were finally evacuated - 1.8 million still live in the affected areas of Belarus.

Luca Barbone and his World Bank team return to the research station to verify a possible radiation dose from standing near the reactor. The green light – all clear.

The Bank Team returns to Minsk to continue consultations with Belarussian social, medical and environmental groups.

**Luca Barbone**
We are listening to everything that’s been said and there was a lot of discussion about - er particularly about the, er the feature of the Chernobyl project. What we are proposing for the next three years is a mixture of studies and also some lending to achieve these objectives.

**Sergei Kulyk**
We will look into the issue of people still residing in the areas of high contamination. How to really secure their well-being and if necessary create an alternative. Either resettlement or some ways and means of supply of products that have no effect on the health of people living in those areas which are clean for living but not necessarily for all the previous patterns of activity, for example agriculture. Believe me it is not easy, because there are a lot of controversies in the Chernobyl after-effects.
NARRATOR
Often the consultations are highly charged events.

Chair
Do we need to clarify this or are you ready to settle down now?

NARRATOR
Studying the effects of radiation is a hazardous business in Belarus. Professor Bandazhevsky, one of a group of prominent scientists has been arrested for publishing findings the government did not approve of.

Dr. Anatoly Kasyaneko
There has been an increase in cancer in children and women - thyroid and leukaemia in children and gynaecological cancers.

Professor Bandazhevsky, the former Rector of Gomel Medical Institute attributes this to internal absorption from contaminated food.

Sixty per cent of farmed land is radiated - let’s just think about that: 60% per cent of agricultural plots are radiated and people continue to farm on these lands!

Yushenko Ludmilla, Ecological Council Belarus
Contamination in the water table is a very serious problem because this pollution mixes with radionucleides and a whole range of chemical pollutants which comes down with rain from the atmosphere.

We have no civil society to speak of but we can learn - and we are good students.

NARRATOR
A lingering public image of the World Bank is of an elitist institution which lends money to governments for white elephant projects. Barbone and his team are a sign of a radical change. This mission is all about civil society building – finding out what grassroots organisations think are the priorities. On this trip Luca Barbone will talk to representatives of the environment, human rights, health and technology. The purpose is to design an assistance programme that takes the needs of ordinary people into account, not just the governments.

The World Bank team are going out to the regions and districts to gather feedback. Today they are on the road to the Brest region in the south west of the country where they are meeting a well-known group of enterprises. This is a Spanish-Belorussian joint venture - the shoes are styled in Spain and made in Belarus.

Luca Barbone
We want to see very dramatic improvements in the business conditions before we go to a full implementation of the programme. Belarus has most likely the most difficult registration laws in the world – maybe with the exception of North Korea. This is not compatible with European values. The interference in the financial activities of firms is just intolerable. This is perhaps the reason why between 1994 and today there has been no increase in the number of small and medium enterprises.
NARRATOR
The World Bank is interested in giving more opportunities to the private sector but with a Soviet style command economy this is not easy, particularly in the countryside. Here, at the offices of the Beryoza Regional Committee, Luca and the team step into the Belorussian time capsule.

Agriculture in Belarus is still rooted in the Soviet system of state collective farming the state subsidised Kolhoz and Sovhoz farms - private ownership is hampered by legislation. Belarus shares with Cuba and North Korea a determination to continue with a system of farming Stalin invented to exercise his iron control over the countryside. However these heads of the Beryoza Sovhoz, from the Belorussian farmers’ movement, claim a high rate of production.

Mr Danilevich
Organic methods of farming have always been traditional in Belarus. We don’t use any chemicals and we treat the cattle with herbal remedies.

Luca Barbone
I thank you very much - this was a wonderful, wonderful visit and I hope you, you know, you continue to do as good as you are.

NARRATOR
Over the border in Poland small and medium businesses are doing a lot better and the Bank would like Belarus to follow suit. It has developed with the authorities a modest privatisation programme for retail outlets and restaurants in 14 cities. Brest, on the Polish border, is one of those cities.

In June 1941, the defence of the Brest fortress, on the Soviet-German border, was the scene of a prolonged attack by the German Army. The Belorussians heroically defended the fortress, where the last defender was dragged from a tunnel months after the fortress had been captured. During the German invasion Belarus lost a quarter of its people and the Jewish population was wiped out in the Brest ghetto. Luca and Sergei lay a wreath at the eternal flame in honour of the war dead.

Today in Brest’s Central Market women stallholders seem to have the worst of both worlds. They can barely afford to rent their spaces from the authorities but have none of the job security or pensions of the Soviet times. Their livelihood is at the whim of any petty official. During Perestroika, the Gorbachov era’s new freedoms enabled Christina Richardson to open two restaurants - an Indian and a Chinese.

A former Director of Construction, she has big plans for a hotel and a hospice in Brest.

Christina Richardson
Taxes on business are impossible and stop any growth of business. Everything is under government control; it puts an official price on everything. I can’t charge a kopek more or I will be fined severely. Changes in the law are needed.

I don’t want to get credit to develop my business but taxes take everything and there is nothing left to develop my business.
NARRATOR
The Bank team travel across the Belovezhskaya National Park. It is a miracle that one of the last of the great primeval forests has survived intact since prehistoric times. The Belovezhskaya National Park straddles the border with Poland. After the Soviet break-up, its administration and scientific work seemed destined to fall into decay but a million dollar grant from the Global Environment Facility helped the Park – and its most famous resident, the European Bison - get back on its feet.

Gregory Romanyuk, Belovezhskaya National Park
It’s one of the oldest primeval forests in the world, untouched and preserved. It’s my job to bring in as many tourists as possible. We had 25,000 visitors last year. We have the Museum of Nature, built in ‘60s. We have Tourist routes through the park. You can go on foot, by bicycle, by horse and cart and by car. There are 250 head of bison. There is also controlled hunting in the park organised with German and Austrian groups. The hunting is justified as a way to cull old and sick animals. The vets at the Park have been treating a rare viral illness that is affecting the bison, which has not been widely studied.

NARRATOR
Vladimir Datskevich is Head of Park Security

Vladimir Datskevich
I deal with the security of the Park and forest fires. It is forbidden to cross the border into Poland without a pass from the Customs Committee. It is absolutely forbidden to cross the border.

As a rule, big fires rarely happen on the territory of the Park. In the last 10 years the average size of fires has been two to three hectares – maybe four hectares.

Georgy Kazulko, Belovezhskaya National Park
The Belovezhskaya Park has an enormous biological diversity and there are more than 12,000 species in the park.

So our basic task is to do the inventory. We have created an enormous collection. We also study issues related to the ecological and biological factors of the creatures that play a big role in the ecosystem.

Ludmilla Yevgenievna, Belovezhskaya National Park
Currently we are paying special attention to the spread of exotic species not typical to the Park. In the last 10 years a lot of changes have occurred, especially since the development of tourism. The dynamic is also being damaged by micro rads.

Sergei Kulyk, World Bank
The main idea was to preserve the biodiversity research and studies after the collapse of the Soviet Union because at the time only the business part of this particular forest remained and the scientific side was falling apart.
NARRATOR
While the saving of the Belovezhskaya National Park offers hope in this blighted country, a far more forbidding challenge awaits in dealing with the legacy of Chernobyl. In over 300,000 hectares of land farming and forestry are banned completely. Seventy per cent of Belarus is still radioactive and it’s still reeling from the fallout. Not only on the ecology but on the psychology of the nation. The World Bank is caught between a suspicious government and a hostile donor community. Loans and development assistance will only start when Minsk reforms. Meanwhile the challenge facing Barbone and his team is to collect feedback from the people on how the Bank’s assistance can be most effective. They also believe that fostering public dialogue on the country’s development priorities will help the people of Belarus assert their needs and concerns with a louder voice. Meanwhile, the children are still having to leave the Gomel and Mogilyov contamination zones for long summer holidays abroad.

Natasha
I love my home town most - of course I like Italy but I love my homeland best of all.