

## SUNDAY FEATURES

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# Tourists flock to Chernobyl radiation zone

*The site of the world's worst nuclear disaster attracts thousands of visitors each year*

BY ANYA TSUKANOVA  
AFP, CHERNOBYL, UKRAINE

Yellow Geiger counter in hand, the guide announces that radiation levels are 35 times higher than normal. Welcome to Chernobyl, the site in 1986 of the worst nuclear disaster in history and now an attraction visited by thousands of tourists every year.

Nearly 25 years after a reactor at the Soviet-era plant exploded, the irradiated zone around Chernobyl is attracting curious visitors from around the world, from nuclear specialists to ordinary tourists, willing to pay US\$160 a day to visit the zone.

Described by US magazine *Forbes* as among the "world's unique places to visit," Chernobyl last year hosted about 7,500 visitors, according to official figures.

On one recent trip, a small bus ferried tourists to the edge of the zone, forbidden to those without special permission. At the entrance, each signed a form promising to respect rules aimed at preventing contamination, including not eating or smoking outside, not touching anything and not sitting on the ground or even putting down personal belongings.

The tourists signed the form with nervous laughs. A young Belgian psychologist, Davinia Schouteten, of the radiation and said she planned to throw away her shoes after the visit.

She moved forward with the other tourists nonetheless, heading toward the infamous reactor, now covered in a cracked concrete shell. The Geiger counter registered radiation levels of 3.9 microsieverts, against a normal level of 0.12 microsieverts.

After taking pictures of the reactor, the tourists headed to the abandoned city of Pripjat,

built only 3km from the nuclear plant to house its personnel and from where 50,000 residents were evacuated the day after the catastrophe.

In the city, time was frozen. Soviet-era signs hung from buildings near a rusting fun park. Books and bits of toys sat in abandoned apartments. Hundreds of gas masks littered the floor of a school cafeteria.

At the entrance to a classroom, a lesson plan for the next week — including classes in reading, math, Russian and natural sciences — was written in black and red ink on a piece of paper still pinned to the wall.

"It's very sad. I can't help but feel very sad," said Bobby Harrington, a young woman visiting from Australia.

"[It is] very beautiful and poetic but the whole tragedy makes me feel very uncomfortable with photographing it," she said, adding that she felt like she was intruding by seeing abandoned homes.

"It's too early maybe. There are a lot of people still alive ... It's the voyeuristic element that I feel uncomfortable with," she said.

But other tourists felt no hesitation about the site being made a tourist attraction, saying it was a testament to a historical event.

"I always wanted to see this place, since it happened. It's a very important part of our recent history," said tourist Karl Backman, a Swedish musician.

"I do not think it's bizarre. It's no different from the Coliseum, where people died ... or from Auschwitz. It's history," he said.

The disaster occurred on April 26, 1986 at 1:23am, when one of Chernobyl's reactors exploded, contaminating the



Top: A Swedish tourist photographs gas masks on the floor of a school in the deserted town of Pripjat, 3km from Chernobyl.

Above: A guide holds a Geiger counter showing radiation levels 37 times higher than normal in front of the sarcophagus of the destroyed fourth block of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

PHOTOS: AFP

then-Soviet states of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus with the fallout also spreading to other parts of Europe.

Thousands of people known as "liquidators" from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus have died since taking part in the bid to limit radioactive fallout after the catastrophe.

The death toll from the Chernobyl disaster is bitterly disputed, with a UN toll from 2005 setting it at just 4,000, but non-governmental groups suggesting the true toll could reach tens or even hundreds of thousands.

In Ukraine alone, 2.3 million people are designated officially as "having suffered from the catastrophe," including from higher cancer rates.

# US fights on despite 'end' to combat in Iraq

*American troops have participated in at least three major firefights since Obama's Aug. 31 announcement*

BY JIM LONEY

REUTERS, BAGHDAD

Since US President Barack Obama declared an end to combat operations in Iraq, US troops have waged a gun battle with a suicide squad in Baghdad, dropped bombs on armed militants in Baquba and assisted Iraqi soldiers in a raid in Falluja.

Obama's announcement on Aug. 31 has not meant the end of fighting for some of the 50,000 US military personnel remaining in Iraq seven-and-a-half years after the invasion that removed Saddam Hussein.

"Our rules of engagement have not changed. Iraq does remain from time to time a dangerous place, so when our soldiers are attacked they will return fire," said Brigadier General Jeffrey Buchanan, a US military spokesman.

The American role in Iraq's battle to quell a tenacious Islamist insurgency has been waning since security in cities and towns was handed over to Iraqi police and soldiers in June last year.

Officially, US forces remain in Iraq to "advise, train and assist."

When they answered a call for help

two weeks ago from Iraqi soldiers overwhelmed in a gunfight with militants hiding in a palm grove near Baquba in Diyala province, US troops brought in attack helicopters and F-16 jet fighters.

The F-16s dropped two bombs to help end the skirmish. They were the first bombs used in Iraq by the US since July last year, Buchanan said.

## 15 ATTACKS PER DAY

Overall violence has dropped sharply since the peak of the sectarian slaughter in which tens of thousands of people were killed in 2006 and 2007. The US military says there are about 15 attacks in Iraq each day on average.

American soldiers are no longer supposed to be on the frontline of the fight against Sunni Islamist al Qaeda, Shi'ite militias and other groups still active in Iraq.

They routinely ride along with Iraqi special forces in counter-terrorism operations but no longer play a direct role, for example, in a raid on an al-Qaeda hideout.

Colonel Mark Mitchell, commander

of a US special operations training force, said Americans are routinely outnumbered by Iraqis two-to-one on such missions but the ratio can be as high as eight-to-one.

Iraqis plan and lead the operation and conduct the assault, while Americans hold back, watching, coaching and supervising, entering the hideout only when the Iraqis have secured it.

"We call it the Darth Vader model ... the imperial storm troopers, they'll go in, secure the target. Once it's all secure then Darth Vader can go in and walk through," Mitchell said. "The bottom line is, we're not in the house."

US officials say a senior American officer will be at the side of the Iraqi commander, coaching. US troops will ensure the Iraqis are securing the scene perimeter, controlling crowds and properly gathering forensic evidence.

As in the Baquba shootout, they will call up air support, bringing in weaponry the Iraqis lack. They will arrange medical evacuations.

They can support the Iraqis with technology by providing live video links from aerial drones, allowing ground

commanders to see where their troops and their adversaries are positioned.

## LOCAL OFFICIALS CRITICAL

On Sept. 15, US and Iraqi special operations forces raided a house in Falluja in darkness in pursuit of suspected al-Qaeda militants, Buchanan said.

The assault force came under fire from several locations and shot back, according to Buchanan, who said four al-Qaeda militants were killed with two other men who emerged from a house with weapons and appeared to be a threat.

Local officials criticized the raid and said seven people were killed including two women and three children.

In the Sept. 5 attack by suicide bombers and gunmen on an Iraqi base in Baghdad, US troops got involved in the gunfight.

The US military routinely has personnel at the base and about 100 advisers were on hand that day. A US drone fed real-time pictures of the attack to commanders.

Buchanan said the Americans helped repel the attackers, who killed 12 people



An Iraqi soldier stands on the edge of a crater following a car bomb attack in a residential district in Baghdad on Sept. 19, one of two near-simultaneous car bombs that killed over two-dozen people and wounded more than 100.

PHOTO: AFP

and wounded three-dozen more.

"Our soldiers were there and they returned fire," he said.

With the slow-motion US disengagement from Iraq scheduled for completion at the end of next year, US commanders concede there is a sense of urgency in their training of Iraqi forces.

At the same time, they say they are confident the Iraqis can handle what the remaining insurgents can throw at them, with Americans in the background.

"This is their country," Mitchell said. "They are capable, they are willing and they are able to take the lead."

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY MUHAMMAD MOHAMMED