Sounding worse, when things are really getting better

Let's get some crucial perspective on alarmist reports of radiation levels

The three remaining reactors at Chernobyl reopened just seven months after the explosion and worked through to the end of their expected lifespans in 2000; since then a small army of workers has been on-site, steadily decommissioning the plant.

Alarmist figures as to the number of people affected by that disaster bear no resemblance to the actual data confirmed by the Chernobyl Forum — a group that includes the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization (WHO) — in their 2006 report. Only 50 deaths can be directly attributed to the accident, among those workers brave enough to return to the plant when it was burning to sort out the mess.

Those who suggest thousands, and maybe even tens of thousands, of cancers are linked to the Chernobyl disaster do so by using a linear extrapolation from what we know extremely high doses of radiation can do, given our insights into the terrible aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Most researchers recognise this is a hypothetical figure for which there is little evidence — it is as unlikely as we can extrapolate down from those incidents as it is to say that, because a temperature of 200°C would kill 100 per cent of human beings, so a temperature of 20°C should kill 10 per cent of them.

Our bodies are able to tolerate radiation up to a threshold. This brings us back to the contaminated seawater, as well as the food items and drinking water in Japan today. The situation is certainly not ideal, and no doubt lessons will be learnt as they always are after every emergency. But as some have indicated, even the worst levels of radiation reported from Japan (aside from those to which a handful of workers have been exposed to) amounts to little compared to natural background levels in other places on Earth, as well as comparing favourably with other exposures we voluntarily engage ourselves with, whether these be through flying or having an X-ray or a CT scan.

ARMY OF DOOM-MONGERS

The anti-nuclear campaigners, however — alongside the army of catastrophists, who seem keen to imagine the worst at every opportunity — are now smugly standing by to say “I told you so”. The fact is, none of them suggested there would be a tiny crack through which a limited amount of radiation may leak. Rather, there was a cacophony of voices prophesying a meltdown and Armageddon.

As none of these commentators were nuclear engineers who attended the site in Japan itself, it is obvious that all they could do was imagine the worst and project that fantasy into the public domain. It would have been preferable to have a few more trained specialists dealing with the actual emergency.

From a sociological perspective, however, it was entirely possible to predict that there would be a clamour of doom-mongers and assorted lobbyists keen to claim this incident for themselves and attach it to whatever cause or confusion they hold.

Eight years ago, as hostilities resumed in Iraq, there were many determined to uncover Saddam Hussein’s supposed stash of weapons of mass destruction, despite the evidence consistently pointing to their absence. We were advised to focus on the unknown, or the “unknown unknowns” as the United States Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously put it.

Two years ago, once the director-general of the WHO had identified H1N1 as “a threat to the whole of humanity”, nations everywhere cranked into pandemic prevention overdrive, convinced that only their precautionary actions could save humanity — again, despite all evidence pointing to the outbreak of a mild version of influenza.

We have to recognise that once a particular mindset is established, it is very hard for people to accept that their model of the world may not be correct — despite all the facts staring them in the face.

So too with the nuclear incident in Japan. Some newscasters seem determined to convey the worst that could happen, as if this were some public service. But surely at such times the role of the media is to report the facts rather than imagine a Hollywood script?

The problem we now confront is that a significant number of cultural pessimists have staked their reputations on proving that there was a major problem and possibly that this was covered up. Such individuals seem to desire — if not need — the worst, to confirm their apocalyptic frameworks.

It is high time we focused on the evidence and let those who are actually capable of dealing with the mess at Fukushima get on with their jobs without having to worry that their every step will be projected onto the world stage as an example of incompetence and conspiracy.

And once the situation is resolved, we will need to ask why it is that we live in such a pessimistic culture that projects the worst at every opportunity, and acts as if it were true in a manner that even impacts on those who should know better.