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The State

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

CHERNOBYL: 20 YEARS LATER

COLUMBIA'S ECONOMY

Per capita income on rise
2 from S.C. study impact

There is still much to learn about effects of disaster, USC scientist says

By JAMES T. HAMMOND
jhammond@thestate.com

Across a swath of Ukraine 2½ times the size of South Carolina, lilacs mask crumbling villages, wildlife populations have exploded, and a place once home to 50,000 is a ghost town.

A few hundred “resettlers” scratch out a meager existence from their vegetable gardens.

This is Chernobyl, 20 years after a nuclear reactor exploded on April 26, 1986, and spewed an invisible but deadly layer of radioactive particles over the region and into the atmosphere. They were blown as far afield as Sweden, Switzerland and the British Isles.

University of South Carolina researcher Tim Mousseau, who has made many trips to Ukraine to study genetic mutations in barn swallows, believes the world’s political and scientific leaders have failed to take advantage of the opportunity to learn from the disaster.

In articles in the journal Nature and other publications, Mousseau

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Wounded soldier needs you to help him

Bush tries to dent high gas prices

Q&A INSIDE

But little relief likely at pumps

Columbia made a healthy gain in per capita income in 2004, passing its previous peak in 2000 because of better job and retirement income, a federal report released Tuesday shows.

The area ranked 72nd in population among the nation’s 361 metropolitan areas, but 199th with its per capita income of $25,898 — measuring everything from stocks to paychecks. The increase was 2.8 percent from 2003.

Columbia beat Greenville and Charleston. Charleston’s per capita income rose 2.3 percent to $20,120 in 2004, while Greenville’s rose 2.2 percent to $19,531.

Still, the area covering Richland, Lexington, Calhoun, Fairfield, Kershaw and Saluda counties earned 10 percent less than

SEE INCOME PAGE A8

Cards from home might jog injured
West Columbia native’s memory

By CHUCK CRUMBO
ccrumbo@thestate.com

Cards and letters from home could help heal Army Staff Sgt. Raymond Lee III’s battered mind.

The West Columbia native does not recognize his wife or remember the names of the other soldiers who were in the Humvee when

has urged world leaders to capture the evidence of the impact of Chernobyl on the children of the 100,000 people who worked on the cleanup crews in the aftermath of history's worst nuclear disaster. So far, he said, there have been just two or three studies of mutations in humans.

There is not even agreement on the potential long-term death toll from the release of radiation around Chernobyl. Official United Nations estimates of 4,000 deaths from thyroid cancer are scoffed at by many public health experts who say the toll will soar as much as 80,000 over 30 to 50 years.

"There has been virtually no work to study the impact of mutation on the overall ecology," Mossoue added. "There's little research on larger mammals — moose, elk, wolves, wild boars — that have expanded their populations in the region.

Research, including that done by Mossoue, shows survival rates just one-third the normal rate in fruit flies and birds. His research on 19 generations of barn swallows shows genetic mutations that are potentially devastating to the species of migrating birds that winter in South Africa and returns to the same nests in Ukraine in the spring.

"The worst-case scenario is that we might see a mutational meltdown, that the (mutation) load would be so great that it leads to extinction of a species, at least a local extinction." Mossoue said.

Tatyana Berkovskaya, 79, does laundry April 3 in the devastated village of Rudnya, 28 miles from Chernobyl. Dozens of area villages are empty in the contaminated zone, but despite warnings, many residents have returned.

died. The husband buried his wife in the yard of their Spartan home.

In the ghost town of Pripyat, once home to 50,000, the last date in the grade book in an abandoned nursery school is April 26, 1986. Pairs of tiny shoes remain lined up in neat rows two decades after their owners fled the zone.

For the resettlers who remain, Beasley said, the government has adopted the attitude that these older residents are better off in the homes they have known all their lives rather than in a city apartment they hate.

"After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian government felt these people were better off on their own land. They seem happy," Beasley said.

Reach Hammond at (803) 771-8474.

NOT WANTING TO LEAVE HOME

Sherry Beasley, grants director at Clemson University's Sandhill Research and Education Center, also has made several trips to the Chernobyl region and has a special interest in the "resettlers," several hundred long-time residents of the contaminated region, mostly elderly people who have ignored government bans and returned home.

The region was dotted with villages where populations of dozens to hundreds had maintained a subsistence lifestyle for generations.

One couple in their 80s, Anastasiya and Nikolai Cheklyenko, had returned to their deserted village within a year of the disaster. They now have lived within the contaminated zone for about 19 years, eating fruits and vegetables grown in contaminated soil and drinking the water.

They have shown no overt signs of ill health.

Another couple Beasley met on an early trip to Chernobyl have

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