**Ex-Soviet nuclear base home to drug addicts**

**KHMELNITSKY** (Ukraine),

**. Monday**

Drug addicts tending pigs and

chickens at a top secret Soviet nuclear

missile base - the very idea

would have had Cold War generals

packing their bags for Siberia ..

Yet that pastoral scene has become

a reality at the former base

of the Red Army's Fifth Strategic

Missile Regiment, hidden away

among the hills and barren fields

of western Ukraine.

Soviet troops pulled out from

Khmelnitsky after the Union collapsed

in 1991. Now only a crumbling

concrete obelisk screaming

"Glory to the Soviet Strategic

Missile Forces!" stands as a reminder

that· here nuclear apocalypse

was once just the touch of a

button away.

A nearby silo housing one of

176 intercontinental ballistic missiles

originally stationed in

Ukraine was blown up early last

year in line with the United States-

Soviet START arms reduction

treaty. Ukraine has handed. over

all its rockets to Russia.

But despite the Soviet military

retreat, well-worn khaki uniforms

are still much in evidence at

Khmelnitsky. They are regulation

issue for the 15 or so hardened

drug addicts undergoing a rehabilitation

course at the base.

And like the soldiers who once

paced their lives to the shrill sirens

of nuclear alerts, they perform

their daily chores at a rhythm set

by a gong hammered by the three

men in charge, the "masters",

who are themselves reformed

addicts.

"Our method is a combination

of work therapy and psychological

correction," said Mr Anatoly

Fedoruk, 35, one of the masters

who spent 18 years of his "former"

life on drugs.

He believes that the rigorous

order established on the former

base and daily labour can heal the

addicts.

"The effect of labour is such

that a person changes and starts

thinking in a new way," he said.

•'Our patients just have no time to

think about narcotics."

In line with a programme designed

by the Khmelnitsky regional

authorities in January last

year in an attempt to save the lives of at least some of the thousands

of locally registered drug addicts,

a group of enthusiasts was allowed

to open the rehabilitation

centre. They called it "Viktoria".

Strict discipline reigns. All patients

must sign a pledge to abstain

from drugs, alcohol and sex,

to be honest and not to leave the

territory of the base.

As in the army, orders are orders,

insubordination is never discussed

and the lonely base, 20 km

from the nearest village, seems an

ideal location for the camp.

Every morning, each patient is

given work orders for the day.

Daily chores range from tending

pigs and chickens at a former military

storehouse to repairing barracks

left in a mess after the last

Soviet soldiers retreated a few

years ago.

. 'Only by going through a.

centre like this can you become

human again," said 30-year-old

Natasha, who once ran a bookshop.

Viktoria is her third attempt at quitting drugs.'

. Ms Larisa Vysotska, director of

the centre, said around 1,500 drug

addicts are officially registered in

the Khmelnitsky region, while the

number of those not reflected in

official statistics may be 10 times

higher.

There are no official statistics

for Ukraine as a whole, where the

50 million population includes a

growing army of desperate young

people seeking refuge from hardship

in drugs,

Ms Vysotska said centres similar to Viktoria would be opened in

several other western regions, as well as in the capital Kiev, ill

Odessa on the Black Sea and in

Donetsk region in the east.

But she said the planned new

centres were unlikely to be able to

cope with the growing ranks Of

drug addicts. '

"We understand we canngt

help everyone. But if we only save

a few lives, our efforts won't be

wasted," she said. Ms Vysotska said she had managed

to save her own son, who

used to take drugs, through a similar

centre in neighbouring Poland.

Mr Fedoruk said that turning

former addicts into educators was.

a key to success. "A lot of people

think a junkie can't quit. But we

prove here that this is possible,

that drug addicts can be the same

as every other human being," he

said.

Natasha, who also carries the

HIV virus which leads to Aids as a

result of sharing an infected needle,

has been at the centre for 10

months and her term will be end in

two. She would like to help the

others to escape addiction when

her own treatment is over.

"Drug addiction is a horrible

disease, incurable for many, but I

want to help people to break free

of that nightmare,". she said. "I

would like to become an educator,

a master. I was given help. and

.now I would like to help the others

... (Reuters)

Piles of antlered reindeer heads: None of the animals was fit for human consumption following an

explosion and a fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the former Soviet Union.

Troops of the now defunct Soviet Union pulled out of Khmelnitsky, in the Ukraine, the former base of the

Red Army's Fifth Strategic Missile Regiment, after the Union collapsed in 1991. Now only a crumbling

concrete obelisk screaming "Glory to the Soviet Strategic Missile Forces!" stands as a reminder that

here nuclear apocalypse was once just the touch of a button away, writes PAVEL POLITYUK.