

Japan crisis drags, France wants global nuclear reform

BY KIYOSHI TAKENAKA AND YOKO NISHIKAWA, REUTERS MARCH 31, 2011



Japanese self-defense force soldiers walk in a line after finding the body of a boy in the tsunami rubble in Higashimatsushima, Miyagi prefecture on March 31, 2011.

Photograph by: Yasuyoshi Chiba, AFP/Getty Images

TOKYO — Japan's nuclear and humanitarian crisis stretched to three weeks on Friday with radiation still leaking from a crippled nuclear power plant, thousands of homeless people struggling to rebuild their lives, and little hope of a quick resolution to either.

As Tokyo Electric Power Co. tries to regain control of its stricken nuclear plant in the face of mounting public criticism and a huge potential compensation bill, the government was reportedly moving to take control of the utility.

The government said it had yet to decide on how to support the utility, which is grappling with the world's worst nuclear crisis since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and may have to deal with compensation claims topping \$130 billion according to one U.S. investment bank.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano held his daily news briefing on Friday having swapped his 'bosai fuku' emergency jacket for a suit for the first time since the early days of the disaster in an apparent effort to portray a return to normality, but angry Japanese see very little change.

"We have changed our clothes to show that the government is stepping into the next stage towards restoration and reconstruction," said Edano.

In the devastated northeast, many Japanese still see only the splintered remains of their homes and lives after a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami on March 11, leaving around 28,000 people dead or missing.

Radiation 4,000 times the legal limit has been detected in seawater near the plant as contaminated water used to try and cool down reactor rods leaks or spills into the ocean, and high levels of radiation outside a 20 kilometres exclusion zone has put pressure on Japan to widen the no-man's land.

More than 172,400 people were still living in shelters around northeast Japan. Many devastated areas looked like a rubbish-strewn junkyard, with cars lodged in the side of toppled buildings and boats still high and dry on roads.

More than 70,000 have been evacuated from the exclusion ring and another 136,000 who live in a 10-kilometre zone beyond that have been encouraged to leave or to stay indoors.

Despite his positive message, Edano said the evacuation of people from near the damaged Fukushima Daiichi complex, 240 kilometres north of Tokyo, would be a "long-term" operation.

Nuclear experts say it could take years, possibly decades to make the area around the plants safe.

With thousands still missing and many areas off-limits to rescuers due to the high levels of radiation, Japanese and U.S. forces will soon begin a joint search for bodies.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan is under enormous pressure as he struggles to manage Japan's toughest test since World War Two.

The damage bill may top \$300 billion, making it the world's costliest natural disaster, and raising concerns about the world's third-biggest economy.

Japanese manufacturing activity slumped to a two-year low in March and posted the sharpest monthly fall on record as the quake and tsunami hit supply chains and output. |

Japan's government may need to spend over 10 trillion yen (\$120 billion) in emergency budgets for disaster relief and reconstruction, the country's deputy finance minister, Mitsuru Sakurai, signalled on Thursday.

RADIATION FEARS CONTINUE

France — the most nuclear-dependent country in the world — called for new global nuclear rules and proposed a global conference in France for May as President Nicolas Sarkozy made a quick visit to Tokyo on Thursday to show support.

France is a global leader in the nuclear industry, and Paris has flown in experts from state-owned nuclear reactor maker Areva to work with Japanese engineers.

Other nations are also scrambling to help Japan.

The United States and Germany are sending robots to help repair and explore the damaged Daiichi plant. Kyodo said some 140 U.S. military radiation safety experts would soon visit to offer technical help.

U.S. nuclear workers were being recruited to join the recovery teams at Fukushima and will begin flying in on Sunday.

"These are not 'jumpers' rushing into a room. TEPCO is bringing in robots to help limit human exposure to high levels of radiation," said Joe Melanson, a recruiter at specialist nuclear industry staffing firm Bartlett Nuclear in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

"Jumpers" is the industry term for people who enter highly radioactive environments to quickly perform a task. The practice was common in the United States in the 1970s and early 80s.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which says the situation at the Fukushima plant remains very serious, already has two teams in Japan, monitoring radiation levels.

The Japanese disaster has revived heated debate over the safety and benefits of atomic power.

The controversy took an alarming twist in Switzerland when a parcel bomb exploded at the office of the national nuclear lobby, injuring two employees. It was not known who sent it.

"CANNIBALISATION"

Illustrating the terrible and surreal times through which Japan is living, one newborn baby's first medical appointment was not with a paediatrician, but a Geiger counter.

"I am so scared about radiation," Misato Nagashima said as she took her baby Rio, born four days after the earthquake and disaster, for a screening at a city in Fukushima prefecture.

Trade Minister Banri Kaieda said chickens and pigs left behind by farmers in the evacuation zone were resorting to desperate means. "A considerable amount of time has passed and I am hearing there were episodes of cannibalisation," he said.

The UN atomic agency IAEA said radiation at a village 40 kilometres away exceeded a criterion for evacuation, while the head of a group of independent radiation experts said Japan must hand out iodine tablets now and as widely as possible to avoid a potential leap in thyroid cancers.

Government officials are pleading for Japanese, and the world, to avoid overreacting to what they say are still low-risk levels of radiation away from the plant.

Food and milk shipments from the region have been stopped, decimating the livelihoods of farmers and fishermen. Various nations have banned food imports from the area.

Contaminated milk was one of the biggest causes of thyroid cancer after the nuclear accident in Chernobyl because people near the plant kept drinking milk from local cows.

Life in Tokyo, the capital of 13 million people, was slowly returning to normal from the early days of the disaster when train service was patchy, workers stayed home and groceries like bread, milk, toilet paper and diapers were rare.

But Tokyo residents still worry about the spread of radiation and another big quake.

"I only go as far from home as I can walk back and I take emergency gear with me," said Noriko Ariura, rummaging in a bag holding a radio, flashlight, bottled water and medicine.

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