

Mounting human toll and nuclear emergency in Japan

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Japan's nuclear emergency worsened today, highlighting the dangers to the lives and health of perhaps millions of people, even as the full horror of the death and destruction left by Friday's earthquake and tsunami continued to emerge.

A fourth explosion at the Tokyo Electric Power Company's (Tepco) Fukushima nuclear power plant, and a government warning of health-threatening serious radiation leaks, have heightened fears that the disaster could worsen.

Officially, the death toll from the magnitude 9 earthquake and tsunami that struck the Pacific coast of north-eastern Japan has risen beyond 2,400, with at least 15,000 unaccounted for. The actual number of deaths is much higher. Police said the total in the Miyagi Prefecture port town of Minamisanriku alone was expected to surpass 10,000. Searchers found 2,000 bodies in the Miyagi region yesterday, including 1,000 recovered from beaches along the Oshika Peninsula, washed back in with the tide.

Entire communities have yet to be reached by relief teams, and shocking video and photographic images are just emerging from remote areas, showing almost incomprehensible devastation. Whole towns have been wiped out, with many residents, particularly the elderly and frail, given little chance to escape. Although 66,000 military personnel had been deployed in six prefectures by last night, some coastal towns in northern Miyagi and in adjoining Iwate Prefecture had still not been contacted.

Last night, millions of people faced a fourth night without sufficient water, food and heating in near-freezing temperatures. "People are surviving on little food and water. Things are simply not coming," Hajime Sato, a government official in Iwate Prefecture, one of the hardest hit, told journalists. Sato said deliveries of food and other supplies were just 10 percent of what was needed. Body bags and coffins were also running short, he warned.

As of 8 p.m. last night, the government said, nearly 450,000 people had been taken to some 2,500 evacuation centres in nine affected prefectures, but some shelters were yet to receive relief supplies such as water and food. Relief

efforts were reportedly being hampered by blocked roads, disrupted communications and a shortage of petrol for ambulances and trucks.

"It's a scene from hell, absolutely nightmarish," Patrick Fuller of the International Red Cross said from the north-eastern coastal town of Otsuchi. "The situation here is just beyond belief, almost everything has been flattened. The government is saying that 9,500 people, more than half of the population, could have died, and I do fear the worst."

Evacuees expressed concern to journalists about their future after losing not just their homes and all their possessions, but their means of livelihood. In the city of Ishimaki, for example, as many as 111,295 people, or about 70 percent of residents, have sought refuge in shelters, according to city officials. More than 53,000 houses and buildings have been damaged, if not completely destroyed by the force of the tsunami, leaving vast areas of rubble that will need to be cleared up.

Repeated aftershocks—more than 200 measuring magnitude 5 or more on the Richter scale—are further hindering rescue and assistance operations, and authorities have warned of a 70 percent likelihood of a major quake of magnitude 7 within days. On Sunday, a magnitude 6.2 quake from a separate fault system about 100 kilometres due east of Tokyo also rocked the capital. Yesterday, a new tsunami scare triggered evacuations along the north-east coast after a large wave was spotted rolling into shore, but authorities later lifted the alert.

In today's emergency at Fukushima, one of four nuclear power facilities shut down by the quake and tsunami, workers were reported to have evacuated the plant. A Tepco spokesman said there had been a "huge explosion" this morning at the No. 2 reactor, where officials had earlier said fuel rods were exposed and at risk of meltdown. Two hydrogen explosions had rocked the Fukushima No. 1 and No. 3 reactors on Saturday and Monday, with at least 11 people injured in the second blast.

At 11 a.m. local time today, Prime Minister Naoto Kan called a media conference to announce that mandatory

evacuations had taken place around Fukushima. He advised people living within a 30-kilometre radius of the plant to stay indoors.

“The level seems very high, and there is still a very high risk of more radiation coming out,” Kan said. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said: “Now we are talking about levels that can damage human health.”

Edano revealed that the radioactivity levels around the plant had been previously misreported in microsieverts, when they should have been reported in millisieverts, which are 1,000 times stronger and much more damaging to human health.

Shortly after Kan and Edano had addressed the media, it was reported that the plant’s No. 4 reactor had also exploded. The prevailing winds were blowing in the direction of Tokyo, where the French embassy warned its citizens to stay indoors, saying that that the fallout could arrive within 10 hours.

Kan’s government and Tepco, the private company that operates the ageing Fukushima facilities and supplies Tokyo’s electricity, warned yesterday that there was the danger of a catastrophic full meltdown in the facilities’ reactors. Such a meltdown could result in a breach of a container vessel and cause a possible radiation leak into the environment.

Part of the container of a reactor appeared to be damaged, the Japanese government also admitted. Edano told reporters “damage appears on the suppression pool”—the bottom part of the container that contains water used to cool the reactor and control air pressure inside. “But we have not recorded any sudden jump in radiation indicators,” Edano said, continuing the efforts of the government and Tepco to play down the dangers. Earlier, Edano had insisted that the problem “will not develop into a situation similar to Chernobyl”.

However, the Kyodo news agency said higher radiation levels had been recorded at Ibaraki between Fukushima and Tokyo. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported that the government had distributed 230,000 units of stable iodine, which is used to protect against thyroid cancer when radiation exposure occurs, to evacuation centres in Fukushima.

Tepco has been pumping seawater into the reactors in a desperate, and previously untested, effort to cool the reactor cores. This last-ditch procedure will render the 40-year-old plant unusable in the future. Nuclear experts warned that even if a full meltdown were averted, the emergency could last for up to a year, due to the difficulties in cooling the cores, necessitating long-term evacuations.

Authorities have declared an exclusion zone within a 20-kilometre radius of the plant and evacuated 210,000

people. At one shelter, a young woman holding her baby told public broadcaster NHK: “I didn’t want this baby to be exposed to radiation. I wanted to avoid that no matter what.”

Despite Japan being the most earthquake-prone island chain in the world, its ruling elite has over the past four decades turned to nuclear power plants, run by profit-seeking conglomerates, to generate a third of its electricity.

Among ordinary working people, anger is reportedly mounting, not just over the nuclear breakdown but also Tepco’s mismanagement of a series of planned blackouts in the country that caused mass confusion and train delays in and around Tokyo yesterday. The giant utility company failed to provide timely information and constantly changed its plans. Its web site crashed, and the company also made mistakes in naming cities and areas on its list of blackouts, which are scheduled to last until next month.

Even before yesterday’s confusion, the company took out a full-page ad in the *Nikkei*, Japan’s leading financial paper, apologising for the inconvenience of the blackouts and asking for cooperation in conserving energy.

The level of international aid appears to be minuscule compared to the scale of the catastrophe. As of last night, about 750 foreign search and rescue workers from 12 countries, accompanied by 35 sniffer dogs, had arrived in Japan. The US aid consisted primarily of a large-scale mobilisation of US armed forces stationed in Japan and elsewhere, which marked the first such wide-ranging joint operation with a host country’s military forces to deal with a disaster, according to Kyodo News.

Even that intervention was affected by the nuclear emergency. The US Navy’s Seventh Fleet was forced to detour after encountering radiation downwind of the Fukushima plant, the Yokota-based US Forces Japan said in a statement.



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