Japanese authorities warn nuclear crisis to continue for months

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Japanese government officials and nuclear industry regulators have warned that the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi plant will not be resolved for months. While the threat of a full-scale meltdown of the reactor cores and spent fuel rods appears to have been averted, authorities are only now beginning to learn of the full extent of the damage inflicted by the March 11 tsunami and subsequent multiple hydrogen explosions at the facility.

Goshi Hosono, an aide to the prime minister, Naoto Kan, was asked yesterday how long it would take to bring the overheating reactors under control. He replied: "I think several months would be one target." Hidehiko Nishiyama, a spokesman with the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), similarly declared: "It would take a few months until we finally get things under control and have a better idea about the future. We'll face a crucial turning point within the next few months, but that is not the end."

A complete cleanup will take many years. On Saturday, the *Wall Street Journal* interviewed Jeff Merrifield, a former member of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission and now a senior vice president at the construction and engineering firm Shaw Group, which has been hired by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) to assist the cleanup. "You're talking years, not months," Shaw emphasised. "De-watering of spaces will be quite complicated," he explained. "The volume of water is likely to be significantly greater than at [Three Mile Island] and it looks like the radiological content of some of it is quite high."

The TEPCO and government-military emergency response crew at Fukushima are continuing to direct large quantities of water into the stricken plant, to prevent overheating. But the radiated water is now leaking into the environment, spreading contamination over a wide area. The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency has reported that Japan's science ministry tested a water sample from about 40 kilometres south of the plant and found 79.4 becquerels of radioactive iodine per litre—nearly double the government's permissible level of 40 becquerels.

On Saturday, TEPCO officials revealed they had discovered water gushing from a 20-centimetre crack in a chamber holding cables for the number 2 reactor. The highly contaminated water is believed to be flowing from the reactor core, where fuel rods have partially melted.

Emergency workers initially attempted to seal the crack with concrete, but this failed. Polymer, sawdust, and shredded newspaper were then used to try to absorb some of the water and slow the leak—but this too has been unsuccessful.

Sections of the international media have implied that once the leak is plugged, then radioactive water will no longer flow into the ocean. However, Japanese authorities still have no idea how many other leaks there may be.

The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency remains cautious. Hidehiko Nishiyama said: "With radiation levels rising in seawater next to the plant we have been trying to confirm why that's happening, and it [the discovered crack] could be one source." The official added that TEPCO will try to trace the leaking water by draining colour-dyed water from the reactors.

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TEPCO is also reportedly considering using an artificial "floating island" or "megafloat" to store excess water. Currently serving as a fishing park in Shimizu Port, south of Tokyo, the steel structure can hold about 10,000 tonnes of water. According to the *Nikkei* newspaper: "TEPCO will tow the floating island to a Kanagawa Prefecture shipyard, where it will be outfitted, then transport it to alongside the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The power utility has yet to decide when to start using the megafloat."

TEPCO has also begun test-spraying a resin solution over contaminated areas in an attempt to seal radiated substances and prevent the spread of wind-borne radioactive dust. On Friday, a sprinkler vehicle sprayed about 2,000 litres over 500 square metres west of the number reactor. The company reportedly plans to spray 60,000 litres of the resin in the next two weeks.

TEPCO revealed yesterday that the bodies of two missing plant employees were found last Thursday. Yoshiki Terashima, 21-years-old, and Kazuhiko Kokubo, 24, were discovered in the flooded basement of the number 4 reactor's turbine building, but a public announcement was delayed until their families were informed. The corpses had to undergo decontamination before they could be returned to loved ones. The power company said the men had likely died about an hour after the earthquake struck, with the *Daily Yomiuri* reporting the cause of death as "hemorrhagic shock due to multiple external injuries."

Reports continue to emerge indicating the reckless risks taken by Japanese authorities and TEPCO at the Fukushima facility, as throughout the country's nuclear industry. For decades, the safety of the population and state of the environment was disregarded, while every effort was made to boost the profits of TEPCO and other energy conglomerates.

The *Asahi Shimbun* yesterday reported that in 2008, TEPCO raised the Fukushima reactors' tremor resistance by 60 percent, in line with government guidelines, but this still proved insufficient. The March 11 earthquake generated a shock significantly higher than the maximum standard. In other words, even if there had been no tsunami to knock out the facility's power supplies, a serious nuclear accident may have occurred. According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, in 2008, TEPCO had said the safety of its reactors was "assured", while NISA concluded the company's reports were "appropriate."

Anger continues to build against the company and the Kan government. About 300 people marched in protest yesterday in central Tokyo, from TEPCO's headquarters to the NISA's offices. "The Japanese people don't protest usually, but this time, we have to show that we can call for change," Masanobu Takeshi, who attended with his wife and son, told the *New York Times*.

Evacuees from Fukushima have also expressed their hostility towards the power company. *Washington Post* reporters interviewed residents who are now among the 160,000 people still living in makeshift evacuation centres set up after the tsunami. "TEPCO betrayed us," Jiro Tochikubo said. "They said everything was safe, but look at this mess... Of course the tsunami was higher than we all expected, but why did TEPCO always say everything was definitely okay?"

Tochikubo recalled that the company initially said that radiation was definitely not leaking. "Tokyo Electric should stop using the word 'definitely' ," he said.

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