

Japanese quakes highlight danger of new catastrophe

Mike Head

26 November 2016

Two earthquakes off Japan's northwest coast this week—Tuesday's 7.4-magnitude shock and Thursday's 6.1-magnitude tremor nearby—triggered tsunami fears and injured some 20 people. Fortunately, they were much less devastating than the massive magnitude-9 quake that caused nearly 20,000 deaths and a nuclear disaster on the same coastline in March 2011.

Nonetheless, they point to the lack of remedial, planning and precautionary measures taken by successive Japanese governments since the 2011 tsunami tragedy and Fukushima nuclear plant failure. They also raise further critical questions about the potential impact of another huge earthquake and the lack of official preparations for such a catastrophe.

The two quakes, and numerous subsequent tremors, came just seven months after two major earthquakes and hundreds of aftershocks killed 42 people, injured about 1,000 and left a trail of destruction through the southern island of Kyushu in April.

All these events highlight the prevalence of earthquakes in the highly-populated country, which sits at the convergence of four tectonic plates.

Tuesday's powerful earthquake generated a tidal wave of up to 1.4 metres at Sendai, about 70 kilometres north of Fukushima, with smaller waves hitting ports elsewhere along the coast, public broadcaster NHK said. Luckily, the tsunami was not larger. Official tsunami warnings were issued but some came too late or failed to reach people.

The first tsunami wave reached the coast of Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, at 6:29 a.m., 30 minutes after the earthquake. The Japan Meteorological Agency issued a tsunami warning for Fukushima Prefecture at 6:02 a.m. but not for Miyagi Prefecture until 8:09 a.m.

Some panic and confusion was observed during the evacuations. In Iwaki, severe traffic congestion

occurred on roads, including the Kashima Kaido prefectural highway that connects the coastal district of Onahama with inland areas.

Wednesday's *Yomiuri Shimbun* editorial questioned whether the authorities had learned the lessons from the 2011 disaster. “[S]ome municipalities issued such notices only after the tsunami reached their areas,” it reported. According to the newspaper's tally, evacuation directives, advisories and preparation notices were issued for a total of more than 550,000 people in Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, Ibaraki and Chiba prefectures. However, only about 12,000 people, or 2.2 percent of the total, actually evacuated to shelters.

The quake also temporarily caused a cooling system in the Fukushima Daini nuclear power plant to stop, leaving more than 2,500 spent uranium fuel rods at risk of overheating. The Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the utility that operates the Fukushima plants, reported that it restored the cooling pump in about an hour and a half.

Doubts remain, however, about the reliability of TEPCO's claims, given its long record of cover-ups of nuclear incidents. Two days, later, on Thursday, the company admitted that workers found large puddles of water in reactor buildings at the plant immediately after the quake. TEPCO said the puddles may have formed from water that spilled out of spent-fuel pools during the quake.

All four reactors at the Daini plant have been offline since the 2011 disaster. While the complex was engulfed by tsunami waves in 2011, it escaped a breakdown, unlike its sister Fukushima Daiichi plant. Three out of six nuclear reactors at Daiichi went into meltdown. TEPCO only admitted in February this year that it had known that a meltdown had occurred but

waited two months before making the information public.

Despite TEPCO's record, the previous Democratic Party of Japan government of Naoto Kan left the company in charge of the emergency and remediation operation, a situation continued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's current administration.

Following Tuesday's quake, nuclear experts reiterated concerns about the safety of the clean-up program at the Daiichi plant. The melted cores of three reactors have yet to be removed because they are still too radioactive for workers to approach. Since 2011, groundwater has seeped into the reactors daily. The water, contaminated by the melted fuel rods, is being treated and stored on site. So far, TEPCO has built more than 880 tanks of about 1,000 tons each.

To try to halt the flow of groundwater into the damaged buildings, the company has built an underground wall of frozen dirt more than a kilometre in length encircling the reactors. The wall is not yet fully frozen, though, and groundwater continues to ooze into the reactors. Scientists have also expressed doubts that the storage tanks or the sea walls being built around the plants could withstand a more damaging earthquake or tsunami.

All but two of the country's 54 plants have remained closed since 2011, but the Abe government is pushing for most plants to be reopened, defying widespread public opposition. Currently, the owners of 24 other reactors are seeking restart approvals.

In Fukushima, an estimated 174,000 residents are still displaced, many living in cramped prefabricated temporary housing. The Abe government is gradually declaring sections of the 20-kilometre nuclear exclusion zone safe and habitable. But many people have refused to return to Fukushima's atomic "ghost towns." For example, four months after Naraha Town was declared safe in September last year, only 6 percent of former inhabitants had moved back.

The latest quakes are another warning of a possible future calamity. In 2013, Abe's government released a study showing that an earthquake of between 8 and 9 magnitude was highly likely to occur within the next 30 years in the tectonic plate boundary called the Nankai Trough, which runs just south of Tokyo, home to nearly 14 million people.

The report warned that such a quake and an

accompanying 30-metre tsunami could kill 323,000 people, destroy over two million houses and cause economic losses amounting to double the annual national budget. Abe simply called on the Japanese people to be "calmly and appropriately afraid."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in "Nuclear power, private ownership and the profit system" published in March 2011, the construction of nuclear plants in one of the world's most seismically active regions on the planet demonstrates two things. One is the subordination of the safety of humanity and health of the environment to the drive for profit and enrichment of executives and big shareholders.

The other is the destructive consequences of capitalism's division of the world into rival nation-states. Since its defeat in World War II, the Japanese ruling class has suppressed basic considerations of public safety in order to develop "energy self-sufficiency" through nuclear power. This industry also provides the essential capacity to quickly develop nuclear weapons, a possibility openly canvassed by US president-elect Donald Trump during the presidential election campaign.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact