

Japan facing worst crisis since WWII

Prime minister says
AFP, Tokyo

Japan is facing its worst crisis in the 65 years since the end of World War II, Prime Minister Naoto Kan said yesterday, calling on the nation to unite after it was devastated by a huge earthquake.

The situation at a quake-stricken atomic power plant also remains grave, Kan said as engineers battled a nuclear emergency sparked by the massive 8.9 magnitude earthquake and the



Naoto Kan devastating tsunami it triggered.

"The current situation of the earthquake, tsunami and the nuclear plants is in a way the most severe crisis in the past 65 years since World War II," Kan said at a press conference.

"Whether we Japanese can overcome this crisis depends on each of us," Kan said, calling for the nation to unite.

"I strongly believe that we can get over this great earthquake and tsunami by joining together."

Japan battled a feared meltdown of two reactors at a quake-hit nuclear plant yesterday, as the full horror of the disaster emerged on the ravaged northeast coast where more than 10,000 people were feared dead.

JAPAN REACTOR CRISIS UPDATE



Yesterday an official at Japan's nuclear agency rates the incident at 4 on the 0-7 international scale of severity. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster was rated 7, while the 1979 Three Mile Island accident was rated 5.

The World Health Organisation says the risk to the public from the radiation leak at Fukushima is "probably quite low".

The International Atomic Energy Agency says the plant's operation has confirmed that the containment vessel around unit 1 is intact and levels of radioactivity nearby have fallen in recent hours.

An official from Nisa says the emergency cooling system at the plant's unit 3 reactor has failed.

TEPCO say it is preparing to release steam - containing a small amount of radioactive material - from unit 3 in an effort to lower the temperature inside. It is also looking for an alternative way to inject water into the reactor because without a continuous flow of water, there is a danger that the fuel rods will become exposed to the air and could melt.

Yukio Edano tells state TV the unit 3 reactor was in danger, but attempts are under way to vent steam. Subsequently, it is reported that radiation has again risen above legal safety limits around the plant.

Mr Edano says venting of unit 3 was completed at 0841 local time, but a partial meltdown in the reactor is still "highly possible".

The Japanese government warns of the risk of another reactor explosion following the failure in unit 3. But a spokesman attempts to reassure people by saying the unit is designed to protect the reactor core in the same way as unit 1, and - so far - the radioactivity released into the environment does not pose a threat to human health.

In his latest public briefing on the situation, Mr Edano says authorities have begun injecting seawater into the unit 3 reactor to try to lower the temperature - as they did on Saturday with unit 1. He says the water level inside is thought to be rising to more satisfactory levels, but the gauge, which seems to be broken, is not showing this.



A vehicle sits on a three-story building at Tsunami-hit Minamisanriku town of Miyagi prefecture after yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Fears of civil war in Ivory Coast

Fresh clashes kill 8

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Security forces loyal to Cote d'Ivoire's disputed president, Laurent Gbagbo, have launched a fresh attack to drive fighters backing Alassane Ouattara, his rival for the presidency, out of a suburb of Abidjan, military officials said.

At least eight men were killed in yesterday's fighting, witnesses said Sunday.

Yesterday's attack comes as Gbagbo continues to refuse to step down after a disputed November election which Ouattara won, according to UN-certified results.

More than 400 people have been killed since the elections, and the fresh violence renews the spectre of the deadly civil war from 2002-2003, which divided the country into areas of rebel and government control. Nearly half a million Ivorians fled their homes.

Gbagbo officials said several hundred soldiers, some armed with rocket-propelled grenades, were taking part in an operation backed by armoured vehicles and two reconnaissance helicopters.

They said the operation was an attempt to bring peace to the restive Abobo neighbourhood, which has been the site of fierce fighting between the two sides in recent weeks.

"There was firing all over the place around the Plateau-Dokui (a local square)," Idrissa Diarrassouba, a resident of Abobo said.

Toure said a member of the 10,000-strong UN force had been wounded when pro-Gbagbo youths attacked him and burned his car at a supermarket in Abidjan.

Israel okays new Jewish settlers in West Bank

BBC ONLINE

Israel has approved the construction of hundreds of homes for Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank.

Officials said the decision was agreed by a ministerial committee on Saturday.

The announcement comes a day after the murder of five members of a family in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

An Israeli government official said the construction would take place in settlements that Israel expects to retain control of in any possible peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Palestinian officials condemned the move.

The attack on the Fogel family has been met with outrage in Israel and has shocked many Palestinians.

Israel suspects the attack was carried out by Palestinian militants.

TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

Japanese towns become mud-strewn wastelands

AFP, Sendai

Wastelands of mud and debris now stretch along Japan's northeast coast where towns and villages used to be, consumed by a terrifying tsunami triggered by Japan's biggest ever earthquake.

The port town of Minamisanriku was practically erased, over half its 17,500 population unaccounted for after huge waves inundated the area following the 8.9 magnitude quake, a hospital one of few structures remaining.

For the lucky ones, such as some residents in Kamaishi city, tsunami evacuation sirens came quickly enough for them to scramble up to higher ground before watching in horror as the raging sea tore through their homes.

The sheer power of the water tossed cars like small toys, and upturned lorries that now litter the roads in Sendai city where the haunting drone of tsunami sirens at one point echoed into the cold night.

Dislodged shipping containers piled up along the coastline and swathes of mangled wreckage consumed what used to be rice fields.

An elderly woman wrapped in a blanket tearfully recalled how she and her husband evacuated from Kesennuma town, north of Miyagi prefecture, where a massive tsunami

swept through a fishing port.

"I was trying to escape with my husband, but water quickly emerged against us and forced us to run up to the second story of a house of people we don't even know at all," she told NHK.

"Water still came up to the second floor, and before our eyes, the house's owner and his daughter were flushed away. We couldn't do anything. Nothing."

As Sendai city endured a pitch-black night amid a power blackout, Sendai Teishin Hospital spokesman Masayoshi Yamamoto told AFP the building was able to keep its lights on using its own power generators, drawing in survivors.

A 500 metre high plume of smoke was seen billowing up into the air from the port in Sendai. A petrochemical complex there has been hit by fire and explosions since the quake struck.

People calmly queued for food baskets, while the shelves of convenience stores were stripped bare. Four hour-long queues of cars snaked out of petrol stations serving 10 litre fuel rations.

"My house was washed away but I escaped with just one bag," said Sayuri Aizawa, 64, whose pensioner husband and 36-year-old son were travelling together in the car.

Quake threatens setback for nuclear energy

AFP, Hong Kong

Explosion and meltdown fears at Japan's quake-hit Fukushima nuclear plant renewed debate about the safety of atomic energy yesterday and cast doubt over its future as a clean energy source.

Officials warned that there was a "high possibility" of meltdown at the ageing facility north of Tokyo, which was rocked by an explosion Saturday following an 8.9-strength tremor that sent 10-metre waves bulldozing inland.

Operator Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) insisted radiation was still within safe levels, but mounting internal pressure meant that some vapour had to be released, and it warned another blast might take place in a second reactor.

Anti-nuclear campaigners said the crisis was a timely reminder of the dangers of atomic energy, particularly in a seismic hotspot like Japan, with Greenpeace describing it as an "inherently hazardous" industry.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Germany over plans to prolong the country's dependency on nuclear power, while Russia ordered a review of its emergency response procedures.

Beijing said it was watching developments closely, having stepped up investment in nuclear power in a bid to slash carbon emissions, with 27 plants being built, 50 in the planning phase and another 110 proposed.

According to the World Nuclear Association there are 443 nuclear reactors operating worldwide, with another 62 under construction, 158 on order and 324 proposed.

Peter Bradford, a former member of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said the disaster was "obviously a significant setback for the so-called nuclear renaissance".

YEMEN UNREST 3 killed, dozens wounded in fresh violence

AFP, Sanaa

The United States expressed deep concern over escalating violence in Yemen, where at least three people were killed in bloody clashes between security forces and protesters yesterday.

Dozens were injured when police and loyalists of the ruling General People's Congress party attacked protesters occupying Sanaa's University Square with live gunfire and tear gas, witnesses said.

Six demonstrators were shot in the head during clashes with police overnight in the southern city of Aden, with 2 dying of their wounds, medical officials said.

Witnesses said police sharpshooters fired on demonstrators from rooftops in the city as protesters attacked and burned a police station and chanted slogans calling for the fall of the regime.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A woman reacts during the funeral of a rebel, killed in clashes with forces loyal to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in Bin Jawad, in Benghazi yesterday. Gaddafi's troops forced outgunned Libyan rebels to retreat eastwards on Sunday and laid siege to pockets of resistance, unimpeded by diplomatic efforts to impose a no-fly zone.

Gaddafi's troops press ahead in east

Rebels get Arab League backing

REUTERS, Ras Lanuf

Muammar Gaddafi's troops forced outgunned Libyan rebels to retreat eastwards yesterday and laid siege to pockets of resistance, unimpeded by diplomatic efforts to impose a no-fly zone.

The United States said a call by the Arab League for a UN no-fly zone over Libya was an "important step," but while Washington said it was preparing for "all contingencies," it has remained cautious over endorsing direct military intervention.

Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa said the League had "officially asked the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone against any military action against the Libyan people."

Nato has said repeatedly that it needs strong Arab support to imply a no-fly zone over Libya. But the other, a UN mandate, is still not in sight.

Diplomats in New York said a Security Council meeting at the weekend was unlikely.

Gaddafi's troops yesterday pushed the rag-tag insurgent forces back on the oil town of Brega, some 220 km south of the rebel stronghold of Benghazi.

Libyan state television said "Brega has been cleansed of armed gangs," but the

report could not be immediately confirmed.

Losing Brega and its refinery would limit rebel access to fuel after the insurgents were pushed out of Ras Lanuf yesterday, another major oil terminal some 100 km to the west.

"The Libyan people need help. We're in danger. The east is in danger," said Abdel Hadi Omar, a civilian rebel volunteer. "The Libyan people can't cope with Gaddafi's weapons. We have people but we don't have means."

Rebels do not want the support of foreign ground troops.

"We believe that, with (a no-fly zone), we will be able to prevail," said Hafiz Ghoga, a spokesman for the rebel National Libyan Council.

Fresh from crushing the revolt in Zawiyah, west of the capital Tripoli, government tanks and troops turned to Misrata, Libya's third biggest city and the only pocket of rebel resistance outside the east.

But a mutiny among government troops slowed the advance of a crack Libyan brigade commanded by Gaddafi's son Khamis advancing on Misrata, with 32 soldiers joining the rebels holding the city, a rebel there said. He said one defector was a general.

As in Zawiyah, the rebels in Misrata were heavily outgunned.