

Fears mount in Asia over Japanese food

AFP, Manila

Supermarkets across Asia are selling fewer Japanese products and restaurants in "Little Tokyo" districts are suffering as fears rise that Japan's food chain is being dangerously tainted with radiation.

No Asian government has yet imposed a ban on Japanese food imports, a step taken Wednesday by the United States which is now barring dairy products and fresh produce from regions around a stricken nuclear plant in eastern Japan.

But South Korea is considering a ban and other Asian governments began testing Japanese food imports shortly after radiation started leaking from the Fukushima power station, which was crippled by a devastating earthquake and tsunami nearly two weeks ago.

Testing has so far not detected any major contamination of imports, and Japanese as well as other authorities around the world have insisted the crisis will not be as bad as the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

But with radiation continuing to leak and Japanese authorities unable to say how much contamination has already occurred, nor exactly where it has gone, people around the Asia-Pacific are growing increasingly anxious.

"Over the past two weeks we've had the lowest number of customers since I opened three years ago," said Japanese restaurateur Shigeo Shigeo Yasumoto, who runs the Saika eatery in the Philippine capital's "Little Tokyo" enclave.

Across the street, a speciality Japanese mini-supermarket was almost empty of customers this week and the Filipino store



A customer looks at vegetables for sale at a Japanese store at "Little Tokyo" district in the financial district of Manila yesterday. Supermarkets across Asia are ordering fewer Japanese products and restaurants in "Little Tokyo" districts are suffering as fears rise that Japan's food chain is being dangerously tainted with radiation.

manager said business had almost dried up.

"I can't blame the customers. I wouldn't buy Japanese products myself nowadays, although we assure the public our stocks were pre-March 11," the manager said, referring to the date of the 9.0-magnitude quake that hit Japan.

Japanese authorities sought in the early stages of the nuclear crisis to assure people that radiation had not entered the food chain in harmful levels, but they acknowledged this week the situation was becoming more dangerous.

Japan has found radiation exceeding legal limits in 11 kinds of vegetable grown near the damaged plant. The government Wednesday banned the shipments of some of those vegetables, as well as untreated milk, from the affected areas.

In a potentially even more alarming development, authorities said Wednesday that radioactive iodine over twice the safe level for infants had been detected in Tokyo's tapwater.

In South Korea, some retailers and consumers were taking no chances despite the nation's

food safety agency testing all food imports from Japan.

Two of the biggest South Korean supermarket chains, Lotte Mart and Homeplus, suspended sales of some Japanese fish this week.

"The customs inspection officials declared them safe but we decided to ban them from stores because consumers were so afraid," said a Homeplus spokesman, adding the retailer had bought more fish from Russia to fill the void.

Huh You-Kyung, a lawyer in Seoul, said she had no plans to eat even fish caught at home,

one of the closest countries to Japan geographically.

"You may say I'm overreacting with baseless fear, but I'm trying to think as protectively as possible for my baby daughters' safety," she said.

Tensions were similarly rising in Hong Kong, where thousands of people work in about 600 Japanese restaurants.

"We can see the impact now, a drastic drop in these businesses and it is threatening the livelihood of people who work (in Japanese restaurants)," Yuen Fuk-wo, chairman of the Eating Establishment Employ-

ees General Union, told AFP.

The World Health Organization has given a guarded response to the situation in Japan, cautiously endorsing the government's actions while emphasizing that the contamination threat for the food chain remains unknown.

"We still don't have a lot of specific information," Swiss-based WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl told AFP by telephone when asked about how much radiation was leaking and the dangers this posed for people and the food chain.

But he said it appeared the Japanese authorities were acting properly in issuing alerts about contaminated products and food bans.

"It appears to be the case that they have taken the precautionary measures necessary," he said.

Pavel Tkalic, an engineer who advised authorities in Ukraine about how radiation had spread following the Chernobyl disaster, similarly said no one yet knew the extent of contamination in the food chain in and around Japan.

"Everything depends on the quantity (of radiation)," said Tkalic, who is now an associate professor at the National University of Singapore's civil engineering department.

"How much of the radioactive material falls into the agriculture, how much exactly gets into the water, but the information is not yet clear."

In the case of Chernobyl, millions of people are believed to have been exposed to some form of radiation in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, where millions of acres (hectares) of farming and forest land remain contaminated.

Japan banks in \$24.6b TEPCO finance plan

AFP, Osaka

Japanese banks and trust groups will provide around 2 trillion yen (\$24.6 billion) to troubled Tokyo Electric Power this month to help cover costs for repairing its power plants, reports said.

Three major banking groups -- Sumitomo Mitsui Financial, Mizuho Financial and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial -- as well as Sumitomo Trust & Banking and Chuo Mitsui Trust and Banking decided Wednesday to offer financing, Jiji Press said.

Sumitomo Mitsui Banking will provide about 600 billion yen and Mizuho Financial roughly 500 billion yen, with the three others each providing several hundred billion yen, Jiji said.

TEPCO needs cash to boost electricity supply and carry out repairs at plants hit by the biggest earthquake ever recorded in Japan, which triggered a crisis at the firm's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant that has yet to be resolved.

The utility had traditionally procured funds mostly through issuing corporate bonds, but this time it has opted for bank loans after its credit rating was downgraded by both Moody's and Standard & Poor's.

TEPCO's financial health is expected to take a major hit due to the nuclear power plant crisis following the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Japan's northeastern coast.

Poor states face 20pc increase in cereal import bill

AFP, Rome

Poor countries will be forced to shell out 20 percent more for their cereal imports this year because of rising prices on global markets despite increased output, the UN food agency said on Wednesday.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation said 70 countries defined as low income and food-deficient, including 39 African states, saw a 5.6-percent rise in cereal output in 2010 but this would not be enough to offset high import costs.

The Rome-based FAO also said it expected global wheat production to increase in 2011, saying it had already gone up by 3.4 percent so far from last year.

It said this was largely due to a recovery in production in key exporters that were affected by drought in 2010, including Russia.

The current production level of 676 million tons of wheat however remained below that seen during bumper harvests in 2008 and 2009, FAO said.

FAO warned that dry conditions in January in Tunisia had "dampened hopes for a robust wheat production recovery." It added that the events in North Africa had displaced large numbers of people and disrupted food distribution.

FAO also forecast a record maize crop in Malawi and Zambia but said there would be a drop in production in South Africa because of "reduced plantings in response to high level of stocks and low prices for maize at planting time."

The UN agency also said food insecurity had increased in eastern Africa, while violence in Ivory Coast had hampered regional trade in western Africa.

In China, FAO said, the drought situation has eased but "the outlook for the wheat crop still remains uncertain."

In Brazil, another key producer, the outlook is "positive" because of good rainfall, FAO said.

Gulf business hub Bahrain faces uncertain future

AFP, Manama

Traffic flowing into the Bahraini capital's business district appears to signal a return to normal, but the Gulf financial hub faces an uncertain future after police crushed a pro-democracy uprising.

Security remains tight in the district, home to a multitude of banks and investment firms which have earned Bahrain its reputation, and a heavy police presence has been kept in place across the archipelago.

Traffic would normally be a nightmare in Manama's business district which also houses ministries and embassies, but the flow of vehicles this week has been light during the day before vanishing at night as a daily curfew starts.

"It is still quiet," said a waiter at a cafe next to the Bahrain World Trade Centre tower, where only three tables were occupied.

Bahrain faces an uphill battle to re-establish its reputation as a safe place to do business, after images of riot police and army tanks evicting protesters from central Manama's now destroyed Pearl Square were circulated worldwide.

According to the opposition group Al-Wefaq, 15 Bahraini Shiites have been killed since anti-government protests broke out last month.

Three Bangladeshi workers and three policemen have also been killed, Al-Wasat newspaper reported, bringing the total death toll to at least 21. The interior ministry, meanwhile, says four policemen have died in the unrest.

Tanks remain stationed around business centres, malls and ministries, while masked policemen toting shotguns man checkpoints around Shiite neighbourhoods and villages.

Many Shiites have not been turning up to work, in line with a general strike called by the main trade union, which said roads were not safe for many employees to leave their villages as many faced arrest.

The labour union on Tuesday suspended the action, saying it had received assurances that Bahrainis on their way to work would not be targeted. But it is unclear if employees will heed the call.



A man walks past a shop at a mall in central Manama on Tuesday. Bahrain faces an uphill battle to re-establish its reputation as a safe place to do business, after images of riot police and army tanks evicting protesters Pearl Square were circulated worldwide.

"Most people don't want to go back to work until the army is pulled out," said an accountant who took part in the protests. "Some are not returning out of fear, but also because we have demands that haven't been answered."

The man, who declined to give his name, said checkpoints also still control the roads to Shiite villages on the outskirts of Manama.

Human Rights Watch on Sunday urged Manama to "end its campaign of arrests of doctors and human rights activists," after seven leading opposition activists and others were rounded up last week, while many others are still missing.

The interior ministry insisted the next day that security in Bahrain was "stable" in the wake of the March 16 operation to crush the protesters' camp in Pearl Square.

Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman, whose Sunni family has ruled Shiite-majority Bahrain for 230 years, said Bahrain will not only "overcome" the crisis but "emerge stronger."

But in a clear indication of the impact on businesses, Khalifa urged banks to "ease" pressure on indebted small- and medium-sized companies.

King Hamad, who called in troops from

other Gulf states to help suppress the protests, said on Sunday a "foreign plot" against Bahrain and its Gulf neighbours had been foiled, apparently referring to Shiite Iran across the Gulf.

Diplomatic tension has soared between Manama and Tehran, with both capitals recalling ambassadors and expelling diplomats.

Bahrain's national carrier, Gulf Air, said on Tuesday that its flights to Iran and neighbouring Shiite-majority Iraq would remain suspended until the end of March.

The mainstream opposition led by Al-Wefaq had called for major reforms leading to a "real" constitutional monarchy under which the prime minister would be elected rather than appointed by the king.

But hardliners within the Shiite majority have gone much further, demanding the ouster of the Al-Khalifa royal family and for Bahrain to become a republic.

Crown Prince Sheikh Salman last month invited opposition groups to take part in a wide-reaching dialogue on the political crisis. But first they insisted on the resignation of the premier, who has been in office since 1970. The future of the dialogue remains unclear.

Warren Buffett eyes India for investment

AFP, Bangalore

US billionaire investor Warren Buffett, on his maiden visit to India, said Tuesday he was looking at investing in the fast-growing South Asian nation.

The chairman of investment firm Berkshire Hathaway, which last week bought US lubricant maker Lubrizol for \$9 billion, said "we need to make large commitments so India is a very logical place to look".

The 80-year-old Buffett, known as the "Oracle of Omaha" for his investment savvy, added that he did not consider India with its \$1.3 trillion economy "as an emerging market, I consider India a very big market."

"We hope to spend some money here," said Buffett, whose company -- which has much of its investments in North America -- was sitting on a \$38 billion cash pile at the end of 2010.

Buffett, who said he was looking at India's consumer goods and financial services sector, was speaking in the country's high-tech hub of Bangalore.

Berkshire Hathaway recently made a foray into India, teaming up with Bajaj Allianz General in the insurance sector.

Buffett arrived in India on Tuesday to join Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates in seeking to persuade India's super-rich to part with some of their wealth as part of "The Giving Pledge" campaign started by the two tycoons last year.

Gates and Buffett, who dined and Chinese billionaires on a similar mission to Beijing last September, are to meet wealthy Indians on Thursday in the capital New Delhi.

Buffett, who has an estimated net worth of \$50 billion, said the pair planned to talk to business leaders "about what we have done. It seems like a good idea (to them) -- terrific."

"If it doesn't, they will have gotten a free dinner," he joked.

Gates, who has an estimated net worth of \$56 billion and has put much of his money into the Gates Foundation, and Buffett have teamed up to persuade rich Americans to give away at least half of their wealth.

So far 59 have signed up to "The Giving Pledge."

Buffett, who has pledged 99 percent of his wealth to charity, said he had never given away a dollar "that has changed my life. I have never not gone to a movie or taken my family on a vacation."