

Japan nuclear crisis drags on but experts hopeful

Radiation in Tokyo water back to infant-safe level

REUTERS, Tokyo

Workers battled to staunch radiation leaks at a Japanese nuclear plant yesterday, almost two weeks after it was disabled by an earthquake and tsunami, but some experts saw signs of the crisis being brought under control.

Hundreds of workers have been desperately trying to cool down the six reactors and spent fuel ponds at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, 240 km north of Tokyo, since the March 11 disaster, including pumping in seawater or dropping water from the air.

Two of the reactors are now seen as safe in what is called a cold shutdown, but the other four remain volatile, emitting steam and smoke periodically and raising radiation levels in the vicinity.

But that does not mean the situation is out of control, the experts said.

"The reactors are more stable as time progresses," said Peter

Hosemann, a nuclear expert at the University of California, Berkeley.

"By now, the decay heat is greatly reduced and it becomes easier to supply sufficient water for cooling. As far as we know, the containments are holding and the radiation levels have dropped."

But he added: "We might see some more release of radioactive material, mostly due to the water going through the systems."

Meanwhile, radioactive iodine dropped back below the level safe for infants in Tokyo drinking water yesterday, an official of the Japanese capital city's government said, confirming media reports.

In one Tokyo ward, Katsushika, a water sample that was taken on Tuesday and publicised on Wednesday had contained more than double the legal limit for infants, at 210 becquerels per kilogramme.

But the level fell back to 79 in a test

yesterday, a Tokyo official told AFP.

The upper limits are 100 becquerels for infants and 300 for older people.

Three workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant's reactor number 3 were exposed to high radiation, Japan's nuclear safety agency said yesterday.

Two of the workers were hospitalised "after being exposed to radiation ranging from 170 to 180 milli-sieverts," NISA spokesman Hideyuki Nishiyama said.

After more than a week, workers managed to connect power to the reactors, but since seawater has been used to cool the plant, checks are needed on all systems before electricity can be switched back on.

Once coolers are switched on, reactor temperatures should fall rapidly and the plant could be on its way to being declared safe, the experts said.

A Japanese nuclear expert said the main risk was from continued radiation leaks was low.



PHOTO: AFP

Mothers with their children receive bottles of water at a Tokyo ward office after officials warned the day before that radioactive iodine over twice the safe level for infants had been detected in tap water. Government officials said the radioactive iodine level has come down to normalcy yesterday.

JAPAN DISASTER dead, missing toll tops 27,000

AFP, Osaka

The number of people confirmed dead or listed as missing in Japan rose above 27,000 yesterday, nearly two weeks after a massive earthquake and tsunami struck the country's northeast coast.

There are fears of a much higher toll from the disaster, which flattened entire towns along the Pacific coast of the country's main island of Honshu.

The National Police Agency said that 9,811 people had been confirmed dead and 17,541 officially listed as missing -- a total of 27,352 -- as of 1200 GMT as a result of the March 11 catastrophe.

A total of 2,779 people have been injured.

The quake has become Japan's deadliest natural disaster since the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake.

NEWS IN brief

Magnitude-7.0 quake hits Myanmar

AFP, Bangkok

A magnitude-7.0 earthquake struck eastern Myanmar yesterday, the US Geological Survey reported.

The epicentre, in the hills of Myanmar close to the borders with Thailand and Laos, was only 10 kilometres deep. No tsunami warning was issued.

It was located 90 kilometres north of Chiang Rai in Thailand and 235 kilometres north-north-east of Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city and a popular

UN rights council seeks access for aid agencies to N Korea

AFP, Brussels

The UN Human Rights Council yesterday urged North Korea to allow relief agencies to have unimpeded access, as it voiced alarm at the "precarious humanitarian situation" in the Stalinist state.

The resolution urged the North Korean leadership to "ensure full, rapid and unimpeded access of humanitarian assistance" that is delivered on the basis of need in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Cuba dismissed the resolution as "politically motivated against the DPRK" and China also opposed the

Two missiles hit Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

At least two Grad rockets fired by Palestinian militants in Gaza yesterday slammed into the port city of Ashdod and just north of it, police and the Israeli army said.

Medics said no one was injured in the strikes, which came a day after Gaza's Hamas rulers vowed to rein in recalcitrant militant groups who had vowed to hit ever-deeper into Israel.

Russia betrayed its interests in Libya

AFP, Moscow

Russia betrayed its interests by refusing to veto the UN resolution on Libya and siding with the West, Moscow's ex-embassy in Tripoli said yesterday after the Libya conflict exposed tensions in the country's ruling duo.

Russia stands to lose tens of billions of euros (dollars) because of the military campaign, said Vladimir Chomov, who was fired as Russia's ambassador before the UN Security Council last week gave the green light to the military operation against Libya.

His comments in an interview with the Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper shed further light on a split in the Russian elite between those who believe Russia should cooperate with the West and those who want it to pursue traditional political and business interests.

Chomov revealed that his dismissal came after he sent a telegram to President Dmitry Medvedev saying that siding with the West against Libya would essentially amount to a betrayal of Moscow's interests in the country.

LIBYA INTERVENTION Nato strives to end split over command

AFP, Brussels

Nato strived again yesterday to resolve a squabble over transferring command to the alliance of military operations in Libya from a US-led coalition pounding Gaddafi's regime.

The latest effort was stymied late Wednesday during a new round of marathon talks among ambassadors of the alliance, partly because Turkey says the coalition bombings must stop first, Nato diplomats said.

Nato envoys were to meet again on the same day European leaders gather across town in Brussels for a two-day summit, also divided over the conflict.

Despite the row, Nato has drawn up the outlines of what its command structure would look like if and when it takes over the no-fly zone, another alliance diplomat said.

Several Nato nations, France being the

Israel presses Russia to reduce Mideast aid

AFP, Moscow

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday sought to persuade Russia to scale down cooperation with Israel's arch foes Iran and Syria as he met Russian leaders one day after a deadly bus bombing.

A British woman was killed and 39 people wounded when a bomb ripped through a bus in Jerusalem on Wednesday, hours after militants vowed revenge for two deadly Israeli raids on Gaza, risking an escalation of Middle East violence.

An Israeli official in Moscow said Netanyahu would make the bus-stop bombing the focus of his meetings, with other topics suggested by Russia such as the Middle East peace process taking a secondary role.

Netanyahu, who landed in Moscow in the early morning of yesterday, was later in the day due to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

He was expected to ask Russia not to give any support to Israel's foes Iran and Syria, amid continued Israeli concern about Russian ties with Tehran and Beirut.

Netanyahu told Russian reporters going into his meetings that it was vital to delay Iran's nuclear programme if only for a few years because this gave time for a new regime to come to power that could reverse the country's course.

Portugal PM quits escalating uncertainty

AFP, Lisbon

Portugal plummeted into fresh crisis yesterday after the prime minister quit following a showdown with parliament over his new austerity plan, increasing the likelihood Lisbon will seek a financial bailout.

Prime Minister Jose Socrates tendered his resignation late Wednesday, saying he could not govern without support after all five opposition parties voted against his minority government's latest spending cuts and tax hikes.

The austerity plan -- the government's fourth in a year -- was aimed at avoiding the need for an EU-IMF bailout to help Lisbon meet debt repayment obligations, a package similar to those granted fellow eurozone members Greece and Ireland last year.

"This crisis will have very serious consequences in terms of the confidence Portugal needs to enjoy with institutions and financial markets," Socrates said after presenting his resignation to President Anibal Cavaco Silva.

The events in Portugal threaten to derail a two-day European Union summit that gets underway yesterday in Brussels that had been expected to finalise the bloc's response to a year-long eurozone debt crisis.

Mubarak loyalists, opponents clash in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Loyalists of Egypt's ousted president Hosni Mubarak clashed with opponents in Cairo yesterday as they sought to have his name removed from public institutions, a security official said.

Around 200 Mubarak supporters threw stones and glass bottles at political opponents during clashes outside the Abdeen Court in central Cairo.

Around 300 people had gone to the courthouse to back a request to have Mubarak's name removed from metro stations, libraries, streets, schools.

UNRC votes for investigator on Iran

AFP, Geneva

The UN human rights council yesterday voted to appoint an investigator to monitor Iran amid a crackdown on dissent and surge in executions in the country.

Ending a nine-year break in such dedicated scrutiny, the council voted by 22 to seven for a resolution that decided "to appoint a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

The council also regretted "the lack of cooperation on the part of the Islamic Republic of Iran" over recurring human rights abuses in the country following a UN General Assembly resolution adopted last December.

Speaking in support of the resolution, US ambassador Eileen Donahoe said the Washington and its partners are "gravely concerned about the situation in Iran where respect for human rights has deteriorated dramatically in recent years."

Iran rejected the resolution angrily, accusing the United States of being the "main organiser of this campaign."

It attacked the "destructive role" of the US in the council and condemned Washington's own rights violations inside and outside its territory.

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Gates, Buffett coax India for charity

AFP, New Delhi

Two of the world's richest men, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, took their charity roadshow to New Delhi yesterday where they hope to coax their Indian peers to part with some of their wealth.

Buffett, 80, and Gates, 55, who are close personal friends, were to meet with leading Indian businessmen at a hotel in Delhi to deliver their pitch and exchange ideas on philanthropy.

The philanthropists announced last year that they would seek to persuade fellow billionaires to commit half of their wealth to good causes as part of "The Giving Pledge".

So far, 59 rich Americans have taken the pledge and the tycoons have said they want to take the campaign worldwide.

"We're not here to pressurise anybody," said Buffett, on his first trip to India. "Everybody has his own understanding of philanthropy."

"What the people in India do is entirely up to them."

India has 55 billionaires, according to Forbes magazine, the third-largest pool after United States and China, and two of the world's 10 richest men are Indians.

But scorching economic growth has opened a yawning divide between India's wealthy and its teeming poor.

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