



Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan (C) visits a tsunami-ravaged disaster area in Rikuzentakata, Iwate prefecture yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Leak found in reactor pit

Japan PM tours disaster zone

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan's prime minister made his first visit to the country's tsunami-devastated region yesterday as officials grappling to end the worst nuclear crisis since Chernobyl said they may have discovered why radiation has been leaking into the sea.

Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) said it had found a crack in a concrete pit that was leaking water at its No.2 reactor in Fukushima, measuring 1,000 millisieverts of radiation per hour.

"With radiation levels rising in the seawater near the plant, we have been trying to confirm the reason why, and in that context, this could be one source," said Hidehiko Nishiyama, deputy head of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA).

He cautioned, however: "We can't really say for certain until we've studied the results."

TEPCO poured concrete into the pit to stop the leak, but water prevented it from hardening and the leak had yet to be stopped, public broadcaster NHK said.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan spoke with refugees living in a makeshift camp in the fishing village of Rikuzentakata, leveled by the tsunami which struck on March 11 when Japan was rocked by a massive earthquake, leaving 28,000 dead and missing.

"It will be kind of a long battle, but the government will be working hard together with you until the end. I want everyone to do their best, too," Kyodo news agency quoted Kan as telling one survivor in a school that is now an evacuation shelter by Japan's shattered northeast coast.

But some survivors were angry Kan took three weeks to visit, accusing the government of doing little to help them rebuild their lives amongst the twisted rubble.

"The timing of his visit is too late," said Ryoko Otsubo. "I wish he had visited this place earlier."

Unpopular and under pressure to quit or call a snap poll before the disaster, Kan has been criticised for his management of Japan's humanitarian and nuclear crisis and his leadership remains in question.

Kan later entered the 20-km evacuation zone and visited J-village just inside the zone, a sports facility serving as the headquarters for emergency teams trying to cool the six-reactor Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Friday the Japanese economy would take a short-term hit and it could not rule out further intervention for the yen.

The consequences for the world's third largest economy have already seen manufacturing slump to a two-year low. Power outages and quake damage have hit supply chains and production.

Hundreds of thousands remain homeless, sheltering in evacuation centres, as the death toll from the disaster rises.

Radiation 4,000 times the legal limit has been detected in seawater near the Daiichi plant and a floating tanker was to be towed to Fukushima to store contaminated seawater. But until the plant's internal cooling system is reconnected radiation will flow from the plant.

Arming Libyan rebels risks diplomatic showdown

US to pull out warplanes, missiles from Libya mission

AFP, United Nations

The nations staging air strikes on Muammar Gaddafi's forces will be heading into a diplomatic minefield if they arm Libyan rebels as well, according to experts and envoys at the UN.

With Nato taking charge of the coalition effort on Thursday, US officials confirmed Friday that American fighters, ground-attack aircraft and cruise missiles would be pulled out of the operation starting this weekend.

The move follows pledges by President Barack Obama to quickly shift the lead to allies in the Nato-led coalition, with the US military playing a supporting role -- providing planes for mid-air refuelling, jamming and surveillance.

"As we transition to a support role, our focus will be on providing enabling capabilities and not on strike capabilities," a US defence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

Some lawmakers heavily criticised Obama over the decision at hearings on Thursday, saying Nato allies lacked ground-attack aircraft that were crucial against the Libyan regime's tanks and artillery.

With international law specialists warning that any supplies would breach the UN Security Council arms embargo that the United States, Britain and France all voted for, diplomats say a council showdown would certainly follow if evidence emerges of deliveries.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Prime Minister David Cameron have both said they believe UN resolutions on Libya allow arming the rebels.

"Many countries would certainly

strongly oppose any attempt to interpret the current resolutions as permitting arms supplies," one senior diplomat on 15-nation council responded, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Western allies stress that no decision has been taken to arm the rebels, but experts on both sides of the divide are frantically scanning past UN resolutions and international law books.

Most international legal experts scoff at that interpretation.

Philippe Moreau Defarges, a specialist on international law at the French Institute for International Relations in Paris, agreed that Resolution 1973 "clearly" does not allow arms deliveries to the rebels.

But he added that it probably would not stop the countries that decide to start supplies.

India bans nuke-related trade with Iran

AFP, New Delhi

India has banned trade in all goods and services with Iran that could help Tehran pursue development of nuclear weapons, a government statement said.

The changes were made in new foreign policy trade rules to conform with a UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Iran related to its nuclear and missile development programme, said the commerce ministry.

India sits as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Iran is the second-largest crude supplier to India after Saudi Arabia and supplies up to 14 percent of the country's oil import needs.

Fukushima 'much bigger than Chernobyl': Expert

AFP, Washington

Japan's unfolding nuclear disaster is "much bigger than Chernobyl" and could rewrite the international scale used to measure the severity of atomic accidents, a Russian expert said here Friday.

"Chernobyl was a dirty bomb explosion. The next dirty bomb is Fukushima and it will cost much more" in economic and human terms, said Natalia Mironova, a thermodynamic engineer who became a leading anti-nuclear activist in Russia in the wake of the accident at the Soviet-built reactor in Ukraine in 1986.

"Fukushima is much bigger than Chernobyl," she said, adding that the Japanese nuclear crisis was likely to eclipse Chernobyl, "the most severe nuclear disaster in the history, on the seven-point scale

used to rate nuclear disasters.

But the nuclear crisis in Japan, which was triggered by a massive earthquake and tsunami three weeks ago, could be "even higher" on the INES scale, said Mironova.

"Chernobyl was level seven and it had only one reactor and lasted only two weeks. We have now three weeks (at Fukushima) and we have four reactors which we know are in very dangerous situations," she warned.

Japan's nuclear safety agency has maintained its rating of the Fukushima accident at four while a French watchdog has upgraded it to six.

A report released in 2006 by the environmental group Greenpeace said 60,000 people had died in Russia "because of the Chernobyl accident", which would also cause "nearly 100,000 fatal cancers."

NEWS IN brief

Nigeria postpones parliamentary vote till Monday

Reuters, Abuja

Nigeria postponed parliamentary elections until Monday after voting materials failed to arrive in many areas, a major blow to hopes of a break with a history of chaotic polls in Africa's most populous nation.

"The decision we have taken is weighty indeed but it is an important step in further ensuring the credibility of the 2011 elections," Attahiru Jega, head of the Independent National Electoral Commission

Vietnam rockslide kills 18

AFP, Hanoi

Rescuers in Vietnam were working yesterday to recover the bodies of two brothers buried under huge boulders as a local official said 18 people had died in a quarry rockslide.

"We will keep going until we find their bodies," said Nguyen Tien Loi, chairman of Yen Thanh district people's committee, the local government office, after authorities recovered 16 corpses and gave up hope of finding survivors.

About 200 troops were mobilised to find trapped workers after a massive rock fall on Friday at Len Co quarry in Nghe An province, north central Vietnam.

Al Qaeda claims responsibility for Iraq's Tikrit attack

REUTERS, Baghdad

Al Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate yesterday claimed responsibility for a siege at a provincial council headquarters in Saddam Hussein's hometown in which 58 people were killed.

Tuesday's attack in Tikrit, a former stronghold of al Qaeda, was the deadliest in Iraq this year. The assailants, who wore security uniforms and set off bombs, stormed the building and grabbed hostages.

Philippine tribal gunmen kidnap 16

AFP, Butuan

Philippine tribal gunmen abducted 16 children and adults in a bizarre bid to have their leader released from prison after he was jailed for another mass kidnapping, police said yesterday.

The kidnapers have threatened to kill their hostages, who include at least two students and were taken captive on Friday from a number of schools in a remote town on the violence-plagued southern island of Mindanao, police said.

2G SCAM India charges ex-minister

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police yesterday charged a former telecom minister with abuse of power and conspiracy in an alleged mobile spectrum fraud that cost the country billions of dollars in lost revenue.

The south Indian politician, A Raja, was also accused of cheating, forgery and criminal misconduct on a charge sheet.

The charges were the first to be laid in the corruption scandal, said to be potentially the biggest in independent India's history, and capped months of investigation into the issuing of the licences and allocation of 2G spectrum.

A special court has been set up to speed up hearings in the case in which prosecutors plan to call 125 witnesses including more than 50 senior government officials.

Yemen's Saleh again signals he's staying put

REUTERS, Sanaa

Embattled Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh thanked thousands of supporters gathered near the presidential palace yesterday for backing the constitution in a further sign he has no immediate plans to step down.

Weeks of protests across Yemen have brought Saleh's 32-year rule to the verge of collapse but the United States and neighboring oil giant Saudi Arabia worry about who might succeed him in a country where al Qaeda militants flourish.

On Friday, tens of thousands of people, both for and against Saleh, took to the streets in Sanaa as negotiators struggled to revive talks to determine his fate.

"I salute you for your heroic stand and thank you for supporting constitutional legitimacy," Saleh told the crowd yesterday amid a sea of portraits of the president and banners supporting his continued rule.

Saleh, who has lost the support of many tribal, military and political backers, met representatives of several tribes, officials said, as he dug in against demands for his resignation.

Thousands of protesters continued sit-ins in the capital, the southern port city of Aden, Taiz, 200 km south of Sanaa, and other cities.

Protesters in Aden called for a general strike and acts of civil disobedience, closing down public transport and prompting many shops to close. Troops fired in the air to disperse young people blocking roads, witnesses said.

Saleh wants to stay on as president while new parliamentary and presidential elections are organized by the end of the year, an opposition source told Reuters on Tuesday.

Hamas warns Israel for killing militants

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian Islamist group Hamas yesterday denied that three of its militants killed in a Gaza air strike were plotting to kidnap Israelis and warned of "consequences".

The Israeli air force launched a missile in the early hours of yesterday at a car travelling in the southern Gaza Strip, killing three members of the Hamas armed wing and wounding a fourth person.

An Israeli military spokesman said the raid, planned jointly with the Shin Bet domestic security agency, was a preemptive strike against militants planning to kidnap Israelis during the coming Jewish festival of Passover.

"An Israel air force aircraft hit a Hamas terror cell... planning to carry out kidnapping attacks in the Sinai peninsula and in Israel during the Passover holiday," he told AFP.

The air strike was a "serious escalation" and Israel "will bear all the consequences", the Brigades warned.

A later statement from Brigades spokesman Abu Obeida called the kidnapping allegation "nonsense" and warned of retribution.

"If the enemy wants to play with fire, it will get burned by fire," Abu Obeida said.

The spate of tit-for-tat violence began on March 16 when a rocket fired from Gaza landed in an open area of southern Israel, without causing casualties or damage.

Syria arrests dozens over unrest

REUTERS, Beirut

Syrian security forces arrested dozens of people, rights groups said yesterday, after thousands marched in pro-democracy protests in unrest that has posed the gravest challenge to President Bashar al-Assad's rule.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights named 21 people who it said had been rounded up by Syrian security in the southern city of Deraa, where the unrest first flared two weeks ago, and in Homs to the north of the capital.

"It is assumed their arrests are as a result of the latest protests," the rights group said in a statement.



A worker of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) shows a crack yesterday in the ground near the second reactor building of TEPCO's disaster stricken Fukushima Daiichi No. 1 nuclear power plant at Okuma town in Fukushima prefecture. PHOTO: AFP

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