

Strong quake shakes buildings in Tokyo

Tepco pours radiation-absorbing mineral in sea

AFP, Tokyo

A strong earthquake of magnitude 5.8 hit central Japan, the US Geological Survey said yesterday.

The quake, which shook buildings in Tokyo, struck at 11:19 am, 83 kilometres north of the capital and at a depth of 20 kilometres, the USGS said.

Operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco) said the tremor did not disrupt the emergency crews who are working around the clock to cool crippled reactors at a nuclear plant hit by a devastating earthquake and tsunami last month.

Tepco yesterday said it has started dumping a mineral into the sea that absorbs radioactive substances, aiming to slow down contamination of the ocean.

It had begun dropping zeolite near a water outlet from the Fukushima Daiichi plant -- which has been leaking radiation since it was crippled by a March 11 quake and tsunami -- from Friday.

The mineral has wide-ranging industrial applications, including nuclear waste processing.

Officials hope it will help to reduce the spread of radioactive materials from the plant into the Pacific, though the effectiveness of the measure was not yet clear.

The mineral has been used to help mitigate other nuclear accidents, including the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident in the United States.

The radiation leaks have resulted in bans on produce from the affected area and hurt the fishing and farming industries because of public fears over radioactivity in food.

On Friday, Japan's government ordered Tepco to offer payouts to tens of thousands of people made homeless by the ongoing crisis.

The total cost from collapsed or damaged houses, factories and infrastructure such as roads and bridges is estimated to reach 16-25 trillion yen over the next three fiscal years, according to the Cabinet Office.

There were no immediate reports of any damage or casualties from yesterday's quake, which the Japan Meteorological Agency said had a magnitude of 5.9 and struck at a depth of 70 kilometres underground.



PHOTO : AFP

Two Japanese women look at a catamaran sightseeing boat yesterday that was thrown by the last month's tsunami onto a two story building, at Otsuchi town, Iwate prefecture.

NEWS IN brief

Hillary in Seoul eyeing next move on North Korea

AFP, Seoul

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton opened a visit to South Korea yesterday as she sought to coordinate with the close ally on the next step forward with the communist North.

Hillary, who arrived in Seoul from Berlin Nato summit over the Libya war, is scheduled to meet Lee over breakfast today.

She will also visit Japan today in a show of support after its March 11 tsunami, the US ally's worst disaster

Haiti again postpones presidential vote results

AFP, Port-au-prince

Haiti election officials yesterday postponed for the second time the release of general election results due to disputes over some legislative races, officials said.

Originally due Saturday, the results were first pushed back to Monday and are now set to be released two days later, they said.

Preliminary presidential results published on April 4 effectively gave victory to candidate Michel Martelly, a popular singer and former carnival entertainer.

US senators urge to brand Ahmadinejad as rights abuser

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton should formally brand Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and 25 other current and former Iranian officials as human rights abusers, senators urged Friday.

"We urge you to designate President Ahmadinejad as an Iranian human rights abuser," Republican Senators Mark Kirk and Jon Kyl, Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and Independent Senator Joe Lieberman pressed Clinton in a letter.

The lawmakers pointed to Clinton's comments, in a March 2 Senate Appropriations subcommittee hearing, that there was "certainly evidence" that Iran's leader-

Berlusconi will seek reelection

AFP, Rome

Silvio Berlusconi, who is beset by sex scandals and legal woes, will seek reelection in 2013, Justice Minister Angelo Alfano -- the man recently identified as the Italian prime minister's political heir -- said Saturday.

At a private dinner with foreign journalists on Tuesday, Berlusconi, 74, told reporters off the record that he would not contest the next election, and named Alfano as a possible successor, according to a press leak.

Alfano also urged fellow members of Berlusconi's People of Freedom Party to put aside internal tensions.



PHOTO : AFP

Libyan rebels flash the V-sign as they advance to Brega from the crossroads town of Ajdabiya yesterday. US-based organisation Human Rights Watch said Gaddafi forces are using banned cluster bombs in Misrata.

Life begins to recover from chaos in I Coast

UN denies 'regime change' role

AFP, Abidjan

Ivory Coast's slow recovery after four months of bloodshed gained pace yesterday as Alassane Ouattara's victorious regime restarted schooling, cocoa exports and its newspaper.

The mouthpiece of the West African state's new rulers, TCI television, said classes would resume on April 26 and traders have begun to shift a 400,000 tonne backlog of cocoa that built up during the conflict.

In peacetime, Ivory Coast was the world's largest exporter of cocoa and income from the crop will be key as Ouattara rebuilds the economy and state institutions after a near civil war that left more than 900 people dead.

The former IMF official and long-time opposition figure took charge of the country on Monday, when his forces stormed the presidential palace in Abidjan and seized strongman Laurent Gbagbo and his close family.

Now, the former president Gbagbo is under house arrest in the north of the country and former rebel fighters loyal to Ouattara are patrolling Abidjan along with UN peacekeepers.

Britain to change royal succession rule

AFP, London

Britain said yesterday it was mulling changes to "discriminatory" rules on the line of succession, meaning Prince William and Kate Middleton's first born could accede to the throne regardless of gender.

Currently the principle of male primogeniture means that the first born son would be next in line to the throne, even if he had an older sister.

But Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who is responsible for constitutional reform, is looking at ways of changing the rule to grant any future princesses born to the couple the same rights as male heirs.

William, the second-in-line to the British throne, will marry Kate at London's Westminster Abbey on April 29.

The British monarch is head of state of 16 Commonwealth nations and any change to the line of succession would require legislation in all these countries.

A government spokesman said discussions had started with Commonwealth countries that would be affected.

"Amending the laws regarding succession to the throne is a complex and difficult matter that requires careful and thoughtful consideration," said the spokesman.

"The government accepts there are provisions which could be discriminatory."

"Discussions have started with those Commonwealth countries who would be directly affected by any change in the rules, and are continuing, but it would not be appropriate to release details at this stage."

Israel raids Gaza after rocket attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli warplanes launched raids against targets in Gaza overnight after two rockets were fired at Israel from the coastal enclave, Palestinian security officials said yesterday.

No one was hurt in the air attacks which struck bases of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigade, the military wing of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas.

A military spokeswoman confirmed the raids and said warplanes struck "targets of a terrorist organisation" in response to "two rockets fired on Ashkelon and Ashdod" in southern Israel on Friday afternoon.

Friday's attack was the first time any rockets had been fired from the Gaza Strip since Sunday when militants in the Hamas-run territory began observing an unspoken truce, a military spokesman had said.

16 killed as tornadoes hit southern US

BBC Online

Severe spring storms including tornadoes have left 16 people dead and destroyed school buildings and homes in southern states of the US.

The storm did most damage in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Alabama.

Among those killed were two elderly sisters in the Oklahoma town of Tushka, where at least 25 people were injured.

In Alabama seven people died, including a mother and her two children. The other seven deaths were in rural areas of Arkansas.

The storms ripped up trees and power lines, tore roofs off houses, and scattered tractor-trailers across roads.

Yesterday local officials confirmed 7 people had died in Alabama, adding to the earlier deaths in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

While several tornadoes were reported, much of the damage in the south was attributed to straight-line winds - sudden, violent downbursts that struck with hurricane force in the middle of the night.

Former ruling party in Egypt dissolved

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court dissolved the former ruling National Democratic Party yesterday and ordered its funds and property to be handed to the government, a judicial source said.

"The administrative court issued a ruling to dissolve the NDP and seize its money, and its headquarters and buildings will be handed to the government," the source said.

The NDP, the party of ousted president Hosni Mubarak, was fighting for its survival after protests forced the strongman to resign on February 11 and much of its senior leadership is now behind bars on suspicion of corruption.

The NDP, founded by former president Anwar Sadat, dominated Egyptian politics for around three decades, winning majorities in elections that were widely seen as rigged.

Algerian president pledges major reforms

AFP, Algiers

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika late Friday announced sweeping reforms including changes to the constitution and electoral law, and initiatives that would enhance the role of political parties.

Bouteflika said the reforms should be adopted before nationwide elections due in May next year.

In a much awaited 20-minute speech, his first since the start of upheavals that have rocked authoritarian regimes in the Arab world since late last year, he pledged to see through the legislative and constitutional changes "to strengthen democracy".

Algeria's 1996 constitution was amended in 2009 to allow Bouteflika, who is 74, to seek a third term.

Bouteflika said he would ask a new constitutional panel of members of recognised political parties and experts in constitutional law to come up with proposals that would be submitted to parliament or a referendum.

A "thorough overhaul" of the electoral law will also allow Algerians to "use their right in the best democratic and transparent conditions", he said.

Political parties, regardless of whether they are represented in parliament or not, will take part in the process, he added.

Legislation on party activities will also be amended to allow the parties to contribute "more effectively to the country's renewal", he pledged.

Bouteflika said the media law would be changed but did not mention opening up radio and television networks to the private sector.

Bouteflika said his country respects the sovereignty and unity of all countries and rejects all foreign interference.

Cuba celebrates 50 years of socialism

AFP, Havana

Thousands of Cubans joined a huge military parade yesterday marking 50 years of socialism and defeat of the CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion, hours ahead of a crucial Communist Party Congress setting new political and economic goals.

President Raul Castro, clad in his general's uniform and surrounded by senior officials, party congress delegates and war veterans, saluted soldiers as they marched through the Plaza de la Revolucion, the political heart of the country and in the shadow of its Communist Party headquarters.

Hundreds of thousands of other marching Cubans followed, including thousands of young "pioneers" waving Cuban flags and chanting "Viva Fidel!" "Viva Raul!"

"Long live the revolution!"

The parade kicked off with a tribute to revolutionary icon Fidel Castro, 84, who officially handed the reins of power to his 79-year-old brother Raul in 2006 for health reasons.

Fidel did not attend the festivities yesterday, exactly half a century after Castro himself proclaimed the socialist character of the regime just a day before the April 17, 1961 landing by 1,400 Cuban exiles armed and trained by the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Within just 72 hours of bloody combat on Playa Larga and Playa Giron 200 kilometres (124 miles) southeast of Havana, Castro had routed out the invaders in what Cuba celebrates as "the first great defeat of imperialism in Latin America."

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