

Japan declares Fukushima plant safe

AFP, Tokyo

Japan said yesterday it finally had control of leaking reactors at Fukushima, in what authorities say is a vital step on the long road to recovery, nine months after its nuclear crisis began.

In a live press conference, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda told the country the crippled reactors "have reached a state of cold shutdown".

The government is hoping the announcement will bring relief to a disaster-weary public still haunted by the effects of the monster tsunami that tore into Japan in March.

Stabilisation of the reactors, whose molten cores spewed radioactive particles into the air and sea, marks the end of what the government has dubbed "Step Two" of the nuclear clean-up.

The initial success of "Step One" -- the stable cooling of reactors and used fuel pools -- was announced in July, after the quake-triggered tsunami pummeled the plant on March 11 and laid waste to much of

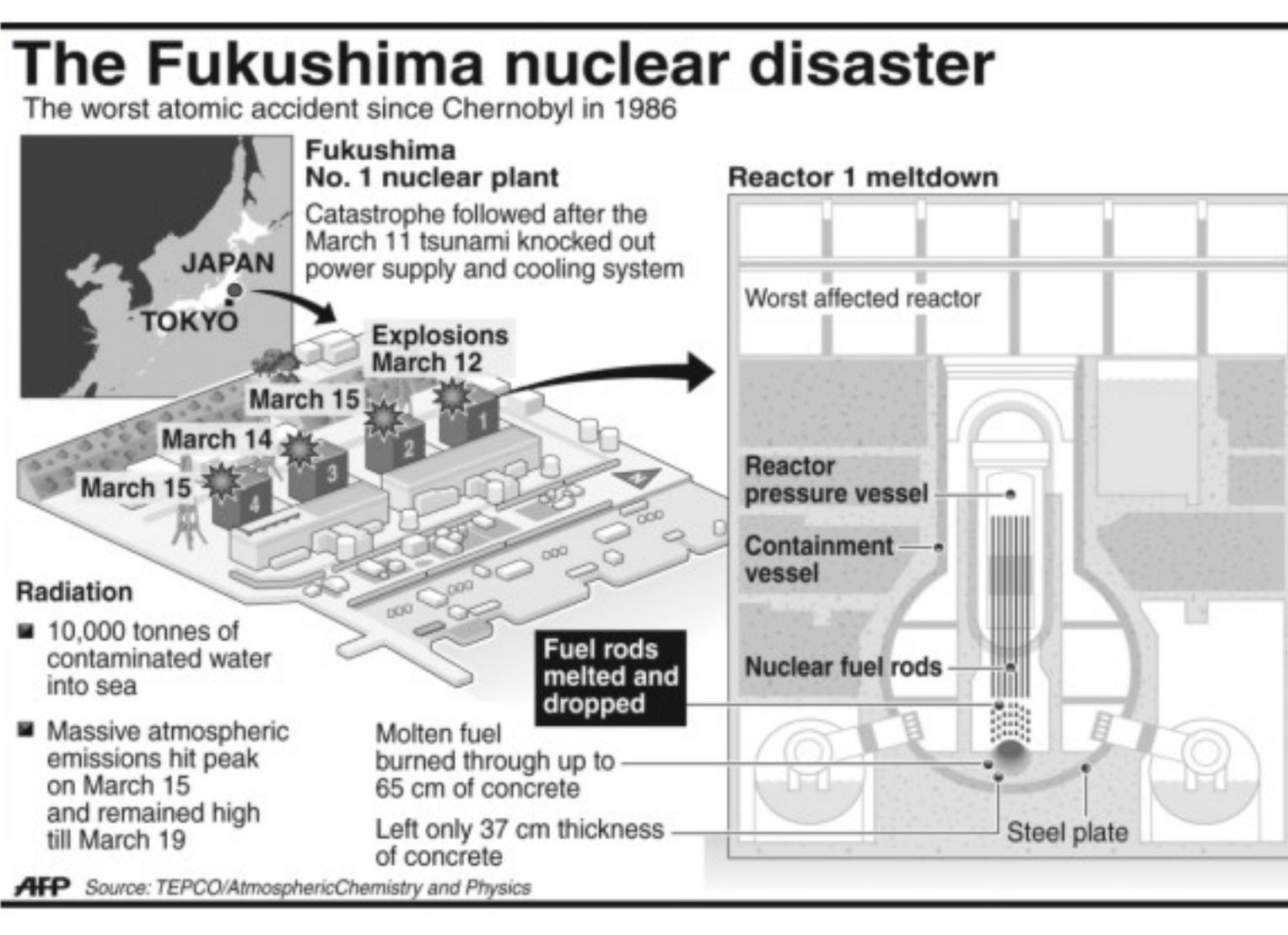


Yoshihiko Noda

the northeast coast.

"Today we have reached a major turning point with regard to the nuclear accident," said the prime minister.

But Noda warned the battle after the world's worst atomic accident for a generation was far from over.



Source: TEPCO/Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics

Tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes in a large area around the plant as it began leaking cancerous isotopes in the days after March 11.

Swathes of this zone remain badly polluted, with the clean-up proceeding slowly amid warnings that some towns could be unin-

habitable for three decades.

Takashi Sawada, vice chairman of the Atomic Energy Society of Japan, a pro-nuclear group of academics and industry specialists, said Noda's declaration of cold shutdown was not a dramatic shift.

Sawada stressed that the use of the term "cold shutdown" did not

indicate that all four disaster-hit reactors were now completely normal.

Environmental campaign group Greenpeace dismissed the announcement as a "smokescreen".

"By triumphantly declaring a cold shutdown, the Japanese authorities are clearly anxious to give the impression that the crisis has come to an end, which is clearly not the case," said Junichi Sato, executive director of Greenpeace Japan.

While the natural disaster claimed 20,000 lives, the nuclear emergency has recorded no direct casualties. But it has badly dented the reputation of a technology on which Japan previously depended for a third of its electricity.

Waves up to 14 metres (45 feet) high swamped the reactors' cooling systems, sparking meltdowns, explosions and the release of radioactive material in the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986.

MEMOGATE SCANDAL Pak generals break ranks with govt

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's powerful army and intelligence chiefs have broken with the government to demand an inquiry into a scandal that threatens to implicate the president, who is abroad following an illness.

They acted after the political opposition asked the Supreme Court to find out who was behind a memo that sought US help to prevent a feared coup and curb the power of the military after Osama bin Laden was killed in May.

In responses submitted to the court late Thursday, the attorney general said the petition should be dropped, but army chief General Ashfaq Kayani and intelligence chief Lieutenant General Shuja Ahmed Pasha did not.

The scandal relates to a memo that sought US intervention to prevent a feared military coup in exchange for overhauling Pakistan's security leadership after US troops killed bin Laden near the Pakistani capital on May 2.

The existence of the document came to light when American-Pakistani businessman Mansoor Ijaz wrote in the Financial Times that President Asif Ali Zardari feared the military might overthrow his government.

Kayani said the memo impacted "national security".

"Therefore, there may be a need to fully examine the facts and circumstances leading to the conception and issuance of the memo," said the army chief in a copy of his reply obtained by AFP.

Court grants permission to Assange appeal

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was yesterday granted permission to appeal against extradition from Britain to Sweden over rape allegations and a hearing will start on February 1.

The decision means Assange will spend a second Christmas at the country mansion of a wealthy supporter in Norfolk, eastern England, as his legal battle stretches into a second year.

The 40-year-old Australian was arrested last December on a European arrest warrant issued by Sweden after two women made allegations of sexual assault and rape.

Assange strongly denies any wrongdoing and says the sex with the women was consensual.



Egyptian soldiers beat a protester with batons and sticks near Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday after demonstrators threw petrol bombs and set fire to furniture in front of the nearby parliament.

PHOTO: AFP

Russia becomes WTO member

BBC ONLINE

Russia finally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) at a ceremony in Switzerland yesterday, after 18 years negotiating its membership.

The Swiss brokered a deal between Russia and Georgia earlier this year that removed the last obstacle to Russia's accession.

Georgia had tried to block Russia's WTO entry since the two countries fought a short war in 2008.

Russia was by far the biggest economy yet to join the global trade body.

It is also the last member of the Group of 20 major economies to join, after China gained membership in 2001.

The removal of trade barriers is likely to stimulate greater and more diversified trade between Russia and the rest of the world.

Paschimbanga liquor toll now 167

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The toll in the hooch tragedy jumped to 167 in South 14 Parganas district of India's Paschimbanga with 19 more people succumbing yesterday as police arrested two more persons in connection with the incident.

More deaths are feared in the state's worst ever illicit liquor tragedy as the condition of several of the victims has been learnt to be critical, according to health department sources in Kolkata.

About 90 victims were receiving treatment at a hospital in Diamond Harbour where the condition of two was critical.

Meanwhile, two more persons were held near Sangrampur village and nearby areas of the district, raising the total number of arrestees to 12.

Owner of the illicit liquor den, Badsha Khokan, however is still absconding, police said.

Health department sources said leave of doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff was cancelled and they were working overtime to attend to the victims.

The victims, mostly labourers, women and rickshaw-pullers, fell ill after consuming the spurious liquor laced with methyl alcohol from several illegal joints Tuesday night.

A 2004 World Health Organisation report concluded alcohol abuse was one of the main killers of young Indian men, while an Indian government-funded study the same year found 62.5 million people were unhealthily dependent on alcohol.

Russia signals Syria shift with UN resolution

AFP, United Nations

Russia surprised Western powers Thursday by putting forward a UN Security Council resolution on the Syria crisis amid mounting international denunciation of the deadly crackdown.

The resolution condemns violence by President Bashar al-Assad's government and opposition groups, but proposes no sanctions. Europe and the United States welcomed the Russian initiative but said the proposed text was not tough enough on the Damascus government.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated, however, that western nations would try to work with Russia in a bid to pass a first Security Council resolution on the crackdown, which the United Nations says has left more than 5,000 dead.

As a key ally of Syria, Russia has tried to head off Security Council intervention in the crisis. With China, it vetoed a council resolution proposed by European nations in October condemning Assad's action.

Russia, however, called emergency talks of the 15-nation body on Syria to propose

the new resolution, which strongly condemns violence by "all parties, including disproportionate use of force by Syrian authorities."

It also raises concern over "the illegal supply of weapons to the armed groups in Syria," according to a copy obtained by AFP. Western diplomats said they had no firm evidence of arms trafficking to Syria.

Western envoys said the draft text represented a tougher Russian stance but was still "unbalanced" because it put opposition violence on the same level as the crackdown by government forces.

They also said there should be a total arms embargo and give clear support to Arab League sanctions against Syria.

Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin again rejected any talk of sanctions and even criticized the Arab League measures -- though the draft does back Arab League efforts to negotiate a settlement.

The Russian envoy later said that some of the initial reactions from his Security Council counterparts were "not entirely objective," while indicating he expected experts from all countries to take part in talks.

Writer Christopher Hitchens dies at 62

The critic of US role in Bangladesh, Vietnam war loses battle against cancer

AGENCIES

The renowned British writer and polemicist Christopher Hitchens, whose targets ranged from God and Mother Teresa to Henry Kissinger, has died after an 18-month battle against cancer.

Vanity Fair, for whom Hitchens worked for the past 19 years, said the writer died on Thursday from pneumonia, a complication of his cancer of the esophagus in Texas.

In an online announcement, the magazine described him as an "incomparable critic, master rhetorician, fiery wit, and fearless bon vivant."

In his book "The Trial of Henry Kissinger," Hitchens branded US president Richard Nixon's foreign policy chief a war criminal for what he said were murderous policies in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Chile.

'A GREAT VOICE'

Writing on Twitter after the announcement of Hitchens' death, Rushdie said: "Goodbye, my beloved friend. A great voice falls silent. A great heart stops."

Former Labour prime minister Tony Blair publicly debated religion with Hitchens at the Munk Debate in Toronto in November 2010,



reports BBC.

"Christopher Hitchens was a complete one-off, an amazing mixture of writer, journalist, polemicist, and unique character," said Blair.

"He was fearless in the pursuit of truth and any cause in which he believed. And there was no belief he held that he did not advocate with passion, commitment and brilliance."

"He was an extraordinary, compelling and colourful human being whom it was a privilege to know."

Hitchens, an avowed atheist, started his career in London but moved to the United States

in 1981, enjoying great success on account of his elegant prose and outspoken views accompanied by a swaggering demeanour.

Radicalised by the 1960s, Hitchens was often arrested at political rallies and was kicked out of the Labour Party over his opposition to the Vietnam War.

The author and prominent atheist Richard Dawkins described him as the "finest orator of our time" and a "valiant fighter against all tyrants including God".

In the course of a career in which he wrote 25 books he clashed frequently with those whom he attacked.

In a 1995 book "The Missionary Position" and a 1994 documentary called "Hell's Angel", Hitchens accused Mother Teresa of being a political opportunist who struck friendships with dictators and corrupt financiers in exchange for donations.

Cancer robbed Hitchens of his voice and hair but he continued to document his declining health in his Vanity Fair column.

Britain's deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who once worked for Hitchens as an intern, summed up the writer as "everything a great essayist should be: infuriating, brilliant, highly provocative and yet intensely serious."

39 wives, 94 kids under a roof

PTI, New Delhi

An Indian man with 39 wives, 94 children and 33 grandchildren, all living under one roof, holds the numero uno position in Ripley's Believe It or Not top 11 strangest stories for this year.

Ripley's Believe It or Not! is considered to be the authority on all things odd, amazing and unusual.

The annual list of the strangest stories of the year was released by it on Thursday.

Topping the list of 11 strange stories, is the story reported by London based The Telegraph, about Ziona Chana, who lives in a four storeyed building with 100 rooms in a mountainous village in Mizoram state, sharing borders with Burma and Bangladesh.

"It's a safe bet that Ziona Chana would not be impressed watching '19 Kids and Counting' or 'Sister Wives' The 66 year old Indian man has 39 wives, 94 children and 33 grandchildren," said Ripley's Believe It or Not in a statement.

"I once married 10 women in one year," Chana quoted as saying by The Telegraph.

According to the daily, Chana met his oldest wife, who is three years older than he is, when he was 17.

Other strangest stories include 'implanting organs in the name of art'; 'Liechtenstein for Hire at \$ 70,000 a Night'; 'Blind Dog Gets Own Guide

Dog'; 'Cemetery Collector with 29 Bodies Arrested'; 'Alabama Company Turns Gun Lovers' Ashes into Ammunition' and 'Mexican Vampire Woman Maria Jose Cristera Immortalized in Wax by Ripley's' among others.



The Ziona family in its entirety with all 181 members.

Russia backs India's bid for UN seat

PTI, Moscow

Russia yesterday backed India's bid for a permanent seat in an expanded UN Security Council as well as its aspirations to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional security grouping.

Moscow expressed its support in a joint declaration issued after the 12th annual India-Russian Summit between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Dmitry Medvedev in the Kremlin.

In their joint statement, both Medvedev and Singh underscored that the UNSC reform should be carried out.

In this context, Moscow is for giving New Delhi a permanent seat in an expanded UNSC, the Kremlin said.

Country swept by cold wave

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worsening the life of those living under the open sky. It has compelled some district administration offices to seek warm clothes for helpless and poor folks in their districts.

The mercury yesterday went down to seven degrees Celsius in Jessor and adjoining areas while it was 13.2 degrees Celsius in the capital.

The Met office says the cold spell is likely to continue for a day or two more when the city dwellers might feel very cold due to cloudy weather.

As people are forced stay indoor in such a cold day, attendance at schools, colleges and many offices is getting thinner every day.

In this context, Moscow is for giving New Delhi a permanent seat in an expanded UNSC, the Kremlin said.

from Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Bogra, Rajshahi and Chittagong report on sufferings of the people due to the severe spell of cold.

Many people, especially children and the aged, are being taken to hospitals with respiratory problems and cold-related diarrhoea, the correspondents say.

Four children died in Thakurgaon yesterday while 97 others were undergoing treatment there. The district administration sought 35,000 blankets from the government.

In Panchagarh, many children were being brought to hospitals with complaints of cold-related diseases in the last couple of days, our correspondent reported.

The Lalmonirhat district administration on Thursday noon sent a fax message to the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management for 1,000 warm clothes.

The lowest income groups, especially the farm labourers and about 50,000 people living in the char areas of the Teesta and Dhrar rivers of the region, are the worst sufferers of the cold patch.