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Reactor container feared breached

by Staff Writers
Tokyo (AFP) March 16, 2011
Japan's nuclear crisis deepened Wednesday with another fire at a quake-hit plant, fears a reactor containment vessel may have been damaged, and a radiation spike that forced the temporary evacuation of workers.



S. Korea to send emergency shipment of reactor coolant

Seoul March 16, 2011 - South Korea said Wednesday it plans to send an emergency shipment of cooling material to Japan to help control its quake-damaged nuclear reactors. Tokyo has asked for 52 tonnes of boron, a key material used for regulating nuclear chain reactions, as it is running short of the metalloid to cool the overheated Fukushima reactors, Seoul said. "We've sent boron samples. Now, we are scraping up all we got. We will ship 52 tonnes of boron as soon as Japan finds the sample compatible with their system," an official of the Ministry of Knowledge Economy told AFP. Boron is an essential ingredient in control rods used to halt or slow down fission reactions at nuclear reactors. Japan also asked for an emergency fuel shipment from South Korea.

Chief government spokesman Yukio Edano reported a sudden and brief rise in radiation levels at the stricken Fukushima No. 1 plant on Japan's northeast coast.

He said the likeliest explanation was an emission of radioactive steam from the containment vessel, although that had not been confirmed.

The nuclear safety agency said Edano's comments suggested there had been damage to the vessel. "The container has an exhaust hole but other than that, no gas should be coming out," a spokesman said.

A team of US experts headed to the country to lend expertise on the crisis centred on the 40-year-old plant, located 250 kilometres (155 miles) northeast of Tokyo, while hundreds of other foreigners headed out.

Scared Tokyo residents filled outbound trains and rushed to shops to stock up on face masks and emergency supplies amid heightening fears of radiation headed their way.

Engineers have been

S-Oil Corp., SK Energy Co. and GS Caltex Corp. said they planned to ship refined petroleum products such as petrol, diesel and kerosene to Japan after many refineries were forced to shut down due to the devastating quake. "Japan's JX Nippon Oil and Energy Corp, our business partner in Japan, called for help," said a spokesman for GS Caltex, South Korea's second-largest oil refiner. "They said some of their refining facilities were damaged. We are reviewing what kind of products and how much we can ship to Japan," he said. Fire crews were fighting a new blaze at reactor number four at the quake-hit Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, operator Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO) said Wednesday. Later, though, crews at the plant had to be evacuated because of a rise in radiation levels, a nuclear safety agency official said. Fund-raising campaigns in South Korea to help victims of the monster quake and tsunami are in full swing.

The country's largest broadcasting company, KBS, said it raised 4.8 billion won (\$4.2 million) in a live TV programme on Tuesday and two other national channels said they would mount similar efforts Wednesday. Entertainment and sports stars also extended more helping hands. "It's so heart-rending to watch the horrible disaster," said Choi Ji-Woo, the leading actress "Winter Sonata", a TV show that is a hit in Japan, after donating 100

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battling a nuclear emergency since a massive earthquake and tsunami knocked out cooling systems last Friday and fuel rods began overheating.

There have been four explosions and two fires at four of the plant's six reactors, and radioactive material has been released into the atmosphere. Two workers have been reported missing since the disaster struck.

Tens of thousands of residents have been evacuated from a 20 kilometre (12 mile) zone around the plant, and thousands of others within a 20-30 km radius were urged to stay indoors.

Edano said radiation levels at the plant rose sharply Wednesday, before falling again, but that there was no need to expand the evacuation area around the plant based on current data.

The nuclear safety agency said the level around the plant peaked at 6.4 millisieverts at around 10.45 am (0145 GMT). Within 10 minutes it had fallen to 2.9 millisieverts.

A spike in radiation levels near the reactors on Tuesday ranged from 30 to 400 millisieverts. A single dose of 1,000 millisieverts -- or one sievert - - causes temporary radiation sickness such as nausea and vomiting.

Workers battling to contain the crisis were all temporarily evacuated because of the rise in radiation levels Wednesday.

A pre-dawn blaze broke out at the number-four reactor but reportedly went out on its own accord 30 minutes after being spotted, the atomic safety agency said.

But white smoke or steam was seen above the stricken plant around 10:00 am (0100 GMT). Edano said there had been no new explosion there.

Eight experts from the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission were to arrive Wednesday to advise on managing the situation, the foreign ministry said. It was not immediately known if they would go to Fukushima.

The government had earlier reported apparent damage to the suppression pool surrounding the base of the containment vessel of the number-two reactor.

Elsewhere at the plant, the nuclear safety agency -- citing information from TEPCO -- said 70 percent of the fuel rods at the number-one reactor and 33 percent at the number-two reactor are believed damaged judging by radiation levels.

It was possible the rods' metal cladding had melted, exposing the radioactive core, a spokesman said.

Seawater is being pumped around the fuel rods in a desperate attempt to cool them down, but there are also fears about pools which hold spent rods.

If water in the pools evaporates, the spent rods would be exposed to the air and radioactive material would be released into the atmosphere.

TEPCO initially considered spraying boric acid over the containment pool at reactor number four but is now leaning towards pumping it through fire engines, the safety agency spokesman said.

France's Nuclear Safety Authority said the disaster now equated to a six on the seven-point international scale for nuclear accidents, ranking the crisis second only in gravity to Chernobyl.

Europe's energy commissioner Guenther Oettinger went further and

million won to the victims through the Red Cross. Her male counterpart Bae Yong-Joon on Tuesday donated 1 billion won. Boy band JYJ, formed by three breakaway members of a popular group, TVXQ, said Wednesday they would give 600 million won (\$530,000). Star football striker Park Ji-Sung contributed 100 million won as former major league baseball pitcher Park Chan-Ho, currently signed to the Osaka-based Orix Buffaloes in Japan, chipped in 10 million yen (\$123,600).

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dubbed the nuclear disaster an "apocalypse", saying Tokyo had almost lost control of events at the Fukushima plant.

"There is talk of an apocalypse and I think the word is particularly well chosen," he said in remarks to the European Parliament.

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DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Reactor fire at quake-hit Japan plant under control: govt

Tokyo (AFP) March 16, 2011

A fire which broke out early Wednesday at a quake-hit Japanese nuclear power plant is under control, the government said. "We have received information from TEPCO that the fire and smoke is now invisible and it appears to have gone out of its own accord," Minoru Ogoda, a spokesman for the state nuclear safety agency, told AFP. The plant is operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO). ... read more



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