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Nuclear waste leak fear after Japan quake

Justin McCurry in Tokyo
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Nuclear power officials in Japan yesterday admitted that the world's largest nuclear power plant had suffered at least 50 malfunctions, including burst pipes, water leaks and radioactive waste spillage, when it was hit by Monday's earthquake.

Officials were investigating possible radioactive leaks from the plant after reports that several drums carrying low-level nuclear waste tipped over and lost their lids during the earthquake in northern Japan, which had a magnitude of 6.8.

The death toll from the quake, which centred on the town of Kashiwazaki in Niigata prefecture, rose to nine overnight as more bodies were pulled from the rubble. The victims - six women and three men - were in their 70s and 80s.

About 1,000 people were injured, 47 of them seriously, and thousands of homes were without gas and water.

One person is still unaccounted for and 13,000 people were evacuated amid fears of landslides in areas weakened by the quake and heavy rain.

Residents were angered by Tokyo Electric Power's response to damage caused by the quake. Ten hours after it assured residents that no radioactivity had leaked during a blaze at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant - the world's largest in terms of power output - the firm said 1,200 litres (264 gallons) of water containing radioactive material had spilled from a tank and flushed into the sea during the disaster. It said the amount of radiation involved was well below safety standards and posed no threat to the environment.

Although the leak was discovered at around noon - about two hours after the earthquake - Tokyo Electric did not confirm to ministers that the water contained radioactive material until after 6pm. The public was not informed until 9.45pm.

"Their report was late, and they were also behind in putting out the fire," said Sanae Takaichi, minister with responsibility for science and technology. "It is important that they thoroughly investigate the cause."

Japan's 55 nuclear reactors supply about a third of its electricity, but the industry's reputation has suffered several setbacks in recent years, including the deaths of five workers in an accident at Mihama nuclear power plant in western Japan in August 2004, as well as the deaths of two people at the Tokaimura reprocessing plant in 1999.

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