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Japan tsunami spares major economic zones

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Japan evacuates thousands from vicinity of two nuclear power plants

But in an update on its Web site, Tokyo Electric said one of its employees working in unit No. 1 was treated for radiation exposure by a special physician. Tokyo Electric also said, shortly before the explosion, that even though it was injecting water into the reactor vessel, levels were still dropping. It said water levels in unit No. 1 were lower than normal but stable.

The status of Tokyo Electric's Daina plants remained unclear. Earlier, they had been said to have completed automatic shutdowns. But Saturday, Tokyo Electric suggested that they were having problems similar to the ones at the other nuclear complex because of disruptions in the power supply needed to run cooling facilities.

"The danger is the very thermally hot reactor cores at the plant must be continuously cooled for 24 to 48 hours," said Kevin Kamps, a specialist in nuclear waste at Beyond Nuclear, a group devoted to highlighting the perils of nuclear power. "Without any electricity, the pumps won't be able to pump water through the hot reactor cores to cool them."

President Obama said at a news conference that he had told Energy Secretary Steven Chu to offer help to Japan.

In a statement that confused nuclear experts, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Friday morning that U.S. Air Force planes in Japan had delivered "coolant" to a nuclear power plant affected by the quake. Nuclear reactors do not require special coolants, only large amounts of pumped water.

"They have very high engineering standards, but one of their plants came under a lot of stress with the earthquake and didn't have enough coolant," she said, "and so Air Force planes were able to deliver that."

An Air Force spokesman at the Pentagon, however, said

VIDEO



Smoke pours from Japan nuclear plant

An explosion at a nuclear power station tore down the walls of one building Saturday as smoke poured out. Japanese officials said they feared the reactor could melt down following the failure of its cooling system in the earthquake and tsunami. (March 12)

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A wave of destruction
Friday's massive earthquake triggered a powerful tsunami that devastated the coastline north of Tokyo. See tsunami intensity, affected areas and aftershocks.

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he was unaware of any deliveries being made by Air Force planes related to the reactor issues.

"To our knowledge, we have delivered nothing in support of the nuclear power plant," Lt. Col. John Haynes said. "Obviously, we stand by to assist with anything they might need." He said the Air Force had received no formal request for help.

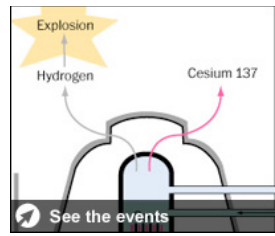
State Department officials later said Clinton misspoke.

In addition to the efforts to get Tokyo Electric's nuclear reactors under control, Japan's NISA said Friday that a fire had broken out at the Onagawa nuclear power plant but was later extinguished. The three reactors at the Onagawa site remained closed.

The key buildings in the Onagawa plant are about 45 feet above sea level, according to the Web site of Tohoku Electric Power, owner of the plant. The company said that was about twice the height of the previous highest tsunami.

The IAEA said it is seeking details on Japan's nuclear power plants and research reactors, including information on off-site and on-site electrical power supplies, cooling systems and the condition of the reactor buildings.

Nuclear fuel requires continued cooling even after a plant is shut down, the IAEA noted.



How the nuclear emergency unfolded
See the events that caused an explosion at a nuclear plant in Japan.

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"This is the most challenging seismic event on record, so it is a severe test," McCullough said. "Clearly the Japanese government is taking this very seriously."

Correspondent Chico Harlan in Tokyo and staff writer Mary Beth Sheridan contributed to this report.

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