

March 20, 2011

Japan's catastrophe and the disaster that awaits

"60 Minutes" correspondent Scott Pelley reports from the disaster zone



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Scott Pelley reports on the American team working to avert nuclear disaster in Japan after the tsunami crippled atomic power plants.

(CBS News)

There's a reason we use a Japanese word for a catastrophic seismic ocean wave: Japan has more tsunamis than anyplace else on Earth.

The massive 9.0 earthquake nine days ago, and the subsequent tsunami, has left nearly 8,500 people dead, some 13,000 missing, and nearly a half million homeless.

It leaves Japan teetering on the edge of a nuclear crisis that has already resulted measurable amounts of radioactivity turning up in milk, drinking water and some crops.

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Travel along with the "60 Minutes" team as they make their way from Tokyo to the heart of the tsunami disaster.

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Ten years of "60 Minutes" reporting on the Chernobyl disaster, long-term health effects, and the "sarcophagus" solution.

Scott Pelley and a "60 Minutes" team have been in Japan for over a week, travelling from Tokyo to the port city Sendai to the once-beautiful resort of Matsushima and into the zone surrounding the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power plant. There, emergency crews are currently struggling to restore cooling and stabilize pressure inside the reactors.

What we have found in Japan is a catastrophe that reveals both the power of nature and the fragility of human technology.

The Fukushima Daiichi crisis is not "one" nuclear emergency - it is four potentially catastrophic events standing side-by-side. In all, there are six reactor stations. Numbers one through four are in peril. Last week, crews risked their lives to get water onto melting uranium fuel. Through explosions and blasts of radioactive steam, a few hundred Japanese joined battle with the most powerful force known to man.

One of the Americans responding to the emergency is Julia Nesheiwat. She's a State Department official who was already in Japan working on nuclear issues. She served in Washington as deputy chief of staff to the director of national intelligence. In Tokyo, she's been on the Fukushima disaster from the start.

"We're providing the full resources of the United States government, everything we've got?" Pelley asked.

"Yes. Absolutely," Nesheiwat said.

"Our best people are on this?" Pelley asked.

"Yes they are," she said. "Working non-stop around the clock in each of the operations centers."

Nesheiwat told Pelley the U.S. is working side by side with the Japanese, but that this was not the case in the beginning.

An American team of top experts arrived shortly after the disaster but they were largely stuck at the U.S. Embassy. The Japanese didn't think they needed the help. But by last Tuesday the emergency was out of control and the U.S. gave the Japanese an ominous private warning.

[Special report: Disaster in Japan](#)

"That if we don't expand the efforts, we'll require heroic work that could be quite devastating for the workers," Nesheiwat explained.

Asked what the U.S. meant by that, she told Pelley, "That means they could very well lose their lives."

"An official with the U.S. government told the Japanese that your people are going to have to die to save that plant, unless you let us help you?" Pelley asked.

"Yes," Nesheiwat replied.

At one point during the week, the hazard was so great the Japanese took all but about 70 workers out of the plant.

Their problem is water: the systems that keep the radioactive fuel rods cool failed. The rods are partially melting, releasing radiation. And it's not just the reactors - there are also used fuel rods, essentially nuclear waste, stored in pools nearby. They're also losing water.

American experts fear one of these pools is already dry. Nesheiwat told "60 Minutes" the danger is multiplied because the reactors are so close to each other.

"That is a grave concern at this time. If there is an explosion, if there is a meltdown, a fire, it can absolutely affect the neighboring plants," she told Pelley.

Asked what that would mean, she said, "Goodness, I don't even want to think what that could mean. That's just something that we would have to really plan for it at the greatest scale. And we're hoping and praying that that's not the case."

Produced by Robert Anderson, Henry Schuster, Nicole Young and Daniel Ruetenik

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