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'The Rachel Maddow Show' for Friday, March 11th, 2011

Read the transcript to the Friday show

updated 3/14/2011 11:08:46 AM ET

Guests: Edwin Lyman, Nathan Layne, Joe Cirincione

RACHEL MADDOW, HOST: Good evening, Lawrence. Thanks for that. That was an incredibly powerful interview. Thanks for doing that. Have a good weekend.

O'DONNELL: Thank you.

MADDOW: Nuclear power is a very, very expensive way of boiling water. Instead of a nuclear fission, a nuclear chain reaction causing a nuclear explosion, nuclear power plants control the chain reaction, channel the massive energy of what would be a mushroom cloud instead into heat, a massive amount of heat. And we use that heat to boil water.

That's what a nuclear power plant does. They boil water. The water makes steam, the steam spins turbines, and the spinning turbines make electricity.

It is a logical process, but it has two problems. First: even when used as directed, making power this way produces nuclear waste—radioactive dangerous waste that can in some cases be turned into the raw material for nuclear weapons. But second: beyond the nuclear waste problem, nuclear power production is kind of a high-wire act. When

the whole idea behind what you're doing depends on this plant controlling a nuclear chain reaction, you really can't afford anything that might interrupt your control. In most reactors, if there's any sort of local disturbance, say an earthquake, the nuclear chain reaction process is immediately shut down, control rods drop into the hot, hot nuclear core to stop the fission process.

But even when it's not still in effect turned on, that nuclear core is still so hot that a lot of things still have to go right in order to keep something really bad from happening.

Have you ever noticed that a lot of nuclear power plants are on the shore, they're right on top of a water source? If you tend to think of nuclear power plants in terms of the

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possibility of radioactive leaks or emissions, it can be unnerving to see those nuclear towers right on your local river, your local coastline. But the reason they're on the water is because they use a huge amount of water to cool down that unimaginably hot nuclear core.

Even when the process of nuclear fission is stopped, the nuclear core is so hot it needs a constant, heavy supply of cool water to be cycled around the nuclear core in order to dissipate its heat, pumping huge amounts of water through the cooling system to dissipate that nuclear heat. Ironically enough, that actually takes power, electric power, even if the plant is turned off.

So, if an earthquake or some other disaster is severe enough to cut off electrical power to a nuclear power plant, if it is severe enough to disrupt the backup systems, too, if the power is off and water isn't flowing through those tanks to dissipate that heat from that nuclear core, then that core will, over time, turn all the water into the cooling system into steam, it will start to evaporate. And if the power is off so long that the watery evaporates so much, that the water levels fall so low, that the nuclear core itself gets exposed to the air, its undissipated heat will cause what is called as nuclear melt down. I'm not using that as a metaphor, I mean that literally.

A meltdown of the nuclear core—it overheats, it melts, it melts through and ultimately destroys the reactor. And then we pray whatever containment facilities built around the reactor are sufficient to actually contain

the disaster.

Today, at 2:46 p.m. local time in Japan, the Tokyo Electric Power Company reported that the three reactors at a nuclear plant called Daiichi were shut down due to the massive earthquake in that country.

Here's an important to note—at 2:46, at that first announcement, they said they had lost electrical power that they get from off-site. But they said they've been able to switch to their backup, to on-site diesel generators.

Remember, the earthquake that hit Japan was offshore. The tsunami caused by the earthquake didn't hit shore until about an hour after the big quake.

So, at 2:46, after the quake, but before the tsunami, the reactor is shut down, right? And they lost power. But their on-site generators were working to keep the thing cool.

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But then 55 minutes later, at 3:41 local time, a second announcement came from that plant. Now, the backup generators were out, too. We don't know if they were knocked out by the tsunami—the timing seems right—but the backup power source failed.

So, then the Daiichi plant was down to just the failsafe for the failsafe, which is battery powered generators. And those only last as long as the batteries hold out, if they can't be recharged.

The stakes here are high. If they cannot keep power onto keep water circulating through the cooling system around the nuclear core, the nuclear core will evaporate the water that is surrounding it, the core will ultimately be exposed, and it will melt down—and that is very bad.

Authorities initially evacuated a two mile radius around the Daiichi plant. They then extended that evacuation area to six miles.

As they vented the steam being produced by the water that is in the cooling system, the Japanese nuclear safety agency said radiation levels had risen to 1,000 times normal in the control room of that plant. Officials reportedly described radiation levels eight times normal at the gates of the facility.

Japan has declared an atomic power emergency. The International Atomic Energy Agency—and this is the good news part you've been waiting for—the International Atomic Energy Agency says mobile electricity supplies

have arrived at the reactor site.

Japan has more than 50 nuclear power plants. At least 10 reactors are off line because of the quake.

In addition to the Daiichi plant, they are also this evening—they also this evening declared another emergency at another plant called Daini as well. This is where the Daiichi plant is and this is where the Daini plant is. You can see nearby. We've also marked Tokyo on this map so you can see where that is, as well as the epicenter of the earthquake so you can see how this all fits together.

Joining us now is Edwin Lyman. He's senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. He's an expert on nuclear power. Dr. Lyman, thanks very much for your time today.

DR. EDWIN LYMAN, UNION OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS: It's great to be here.

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MADDOW: Between the two of us, there's only one PhD in physics and it is yours. If you could just—if you could start by letting us know if anything that I just explained—if I misstated anything or if there's anything critical that I left out.

LYMAN: Actually, it was technically flawless. And I think you should get an honorary doctor at in nuclear engineering.

MADDOW: Well, that's—this is starting off very, very well. I like the sound of this.

Is there anything about how the situation has progressed over the last—even over n the last few hours that makes you feel any better or more reassured about the chances of preventing a big disaster here?

LYMAN: Unfortunately, I'm getting less reassured with every update. The news that the incident was affecting not just three reactors at Daiichi but also a number of reactors at Daini indicated that the authorities were not being up front a long time ago in their dealings with the public, and just makes the situation seem as if it's escalating out of control. So, I'm really worried about what else we are not being told at this point.

MADDOW: When the authorities put up statements about pressure in some of these reactors rising—we saw one report today, for example, that pressure in one of the Daiichi reactors was more than twice its designed capacity. What does that mean? What are they talking about with pressure? How dangerous

is that? How do you alleviate that pressure?

LYMAN: Well, the danger is that, of course, as the reactor gets hotter and the containment atmosphere gets hotter, the pressure will increase. And in order to avoid a potentially catastrophic rupture, the hope is that you release some of the pressure by venting some radioactive gas now and avoid a larger catastrophe later. So, it is really a devil's bargain. But, of course, the radiation exposure resulting from moderate venting is going to be a lot less than if this accident actually progresses to a worst case where we have a full-scale core melt, and then a catastrophic rupture of containment.

MADDOW: To be clear about that venting, that essentially is a controlled, deliberate release of some amount of radiation. And, obviously, that's a better scenario than an uncontrolled release of a lot of radiation. But is there reason to be concerned even about what has been

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vented, even though it's been done on purpose?

LYMAN: Well, any amount of radiation is a hazard. It's an established fact that there's no safe level of radiation. So, of course, any artificial radiation introduced into the environment is a concern.

But I think—you know, I understand the logic behind doing controlled venting at this point and I think we all just need to hope that it's going to work because if there's a catastrophic rupture of the containment and large-scale core melt, we could be facing something like Chernobyl as opposed to something like Three Mile Island.

At Three Mile Island, as bad as it was, they were able to avert a full-scale containment failure, and there was a release of radiation but comparatively small. But, of course, you know, you're dealing with comparatives here. It's—you know, you have two unpalatable choices and you have to decide.

MADDOW: I don't mean to ask you to explain the obvious. But just looking at these images from Japan today, confronting the certainty of hundreds of deaths, the likelihood of more than a thousand, if not thousands of deaths, confronting the certainty of billions and billions of dollars' worth of damage, if there is a—if there is a nuclear meltdown and as you say, we could be looking at something as serious as Chernobyl, does that make this a global disaster in addition to being a Japanese disaster?

LYMAN: Yes, I think in a number of ways, it does. First of all, Chernobyl did inject a lot of radioactivity into the atmosphere and that did go around the Northern Hemisphere. There were certain aspects of that release that we probably wouldn't see here. It was a much hotter plume and it went much higher, but I think we can expect there will be some detectable radioactivity if there were an event of that size in Japan.

But, also, the other ramifications are clearly economic and also they have to do with their ability to mitigate climate change. Our organization, UCS, is not opposed to nuclear power, per se. We do worry about climate change and we understand nuclear power is one option.

But we shouldn't take that option off the table by running nuclear power plants in unsafe way, because, obviously, catastrophe like this could really eliminate the possibility of that

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option. So, our—we believe that nuclear plants really have to make an extra effort to be as safe and secure as possible. And, unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the attitude of the nuclear industry, even in the United States or abroad.

MADDOW: Let me ask you one last question about that attitude and that seriousness about safety. If there is a meltdown, God forbid, at either of these affected nuclear plants that have now been declared emergency sites by the Japanese government, we will be counting on the containment units around the reactors themselves to confine the damage.

Just so we understand it—can you just explain for a lay audience what a containment unit is like, if one has ever been tested in a real life disaster before, and if we should assume that they might be compromised by the earthquake and tsunami themselves?

LYMAN: Well, the containment structures are generally reinforced concrete buildings that have a leak tight liner. And the idea behind the containment is really if you have a—what's called a design basis accident where you have a partial melting of the core, but don't have any catastrophic explosion, that that containment will function to limit radiation releases. Unfortunately, after most reactors operating today were designed and built, they discovered that—well, there are certain types of events that could challenge the containment and they're not impossible.

So, most of the containment buildings at

reactors today are vulnerable to certain severe events that could threaten their capacity to contain radiation, and unfortunately, the Mark 1 boiling reactor, which is what we have at Fukushima, has vulnerabilities that people have known about for a long time, that if there were a core melt that escaped from the reactor vessel, it might also breach the containment.

And so—so I think there's a wide range of containment buildings out there, but I am concerned about the Mark 1s in particular and their ability to contain radiation in this event.

MADDOW: Dr. Lyman, senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists—you have helped me understand this better and you have not set my mind at ease at all. But thank you for helping us explain it. Thanks a lot.

LYMAN: Thank you.

MADDOW: You look at the devastation caused

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in Japan, and it makes you realize just how huge an 8.9 earthquake is. Consider that there may be no other country in the world that is better prepared for earthquakes than Japan is. What happened to Japan is horrific and it is still unfolding. And the reasons why it wasn't an even bigger disaster than it was are really important, and in some cases surprising.

A live report from Japan about what has happened, what is happening now, and some of the reasons the catastrophe is not even worse. Plus, a further nuclear safety update later in the show. Please stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(VIDEO CLIP PLAYS)

MADDOW: What the fight largest earthquake ever reported does to the most earthquake prepared nation in the world. We have a live report from Japan coming up next.

Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Disrupting a meeting of Japan's parliament. Politicians clearly shocked as the floor beneath them vibrates and the chandelier above their heads swings ominously.

It was a scene experienced in offices and homes across Japan.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: We do not yet know how many people died in Japan in the last 24 hours as a result of the world's fifth largest earthquake since we as humans started recording the size of earthquakes. It could be hundreds of people dead, but it could conceivably be thousands—not to mention billions of dollars in damage.

This is what it was like to be at work, at home, shopping, parking the car, doing the things everybody does every day while it happened. Only today in northeast Japan, those things were terrifying.

If you have ever experienced an earthquake, you know how scary the shaking sensation of that can be. But what you can see from this footage we've had out of Japan today is what hit northeastern Japan was so big, it was almost qualitatively different—almost

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qualitatively different anything we have seen.

And even with the astounding damage just Japan sustained today, we are also confronted with the strange fact that it really could have been worse. I mean that in one specific way. Japan is one of the most earthquake-ready nations on Earth. In addition to multiple systems to warn the population and evacuate them from potential tsunamis, they also have one of the world's strictest building codes.

When earthquakes hit and tall buildings swayed like this, that was not a mistake. That's what the billions of dollars in earthquake technology intended—deep foundations and shock absorbers make the buildings sway. When buildings sway, they are less likely to fall.

Office buildings, schools and homes were almost always outfitted with earthquake emergency kits with things like food, water, medical supply, even hard hats and gloves.

Since the 1980s, Japan has invested in concrete sea walls, some as high as 40 feet that wrap around the nation's lengthy coastline to blunt the force of high waves. Some towns closest to water have warning systems by which local authorities can contact people directly in their homes. There are flood gates that close automatically and ports built up on raised platforms.

Every Japanese kid goes through a monthly earthquake drill. Some fire departments even take groups of school kids into earthquake

simulator machines.

For adults, there are community evacuation drills to teach people about specially designed evacuation routes.

None of this is enough, of course, when confronted with a quake and tsunami this big. But even if it is not enough, it is something, and it probably means that many fewer lives were lost today than might have been true had the same quake and same tsunami hit any other nation.

Joining us now is Nathan Layne. He is "Reuters" Tokyo bureau chief.

He's lived in Japan for more than a decade.

Mr. Layne, thank you very much for joining us this evening. We are happy to have you.

NATHAN LAYNE, REUTERS: Thank you very

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much.

MADDOW: What can you tell us about rescue efforts and the aftermath in Japan now?

LAYNE: Right. Well, obviously, the quake hit about 3:00 local time here yesterday, and then the devastation carried through the night. And basically the government, self defense forces, have put all of their efforts into trying to find survivors, trying to get help to people that are under debris or have been washed away, trying to find them.

MADDOW: I know that—or at least I imagine you lived through other earthquakes in Japan if you've been there over a decade. How soon was it clear that this was not just another earthquake, that this was actually a national disaster of really significant magnitude?

LAYNE: It was immediately clear to me. I was actually a few minutes outside the office, and I've been through many earthquakes, and you get—you become immune to them. You're used to them. But this one was qualitatively different.

Outside our building, we—"Reuters" is in a 40-story building. You could say it visibly swaying from side to side. People rushed out into the streets. It was obvious that this one was a big one.

MADDOW: Do you think Japan's earthquake preparedness and tsunami preparedness made a difference in the survivability of this disaster?

LAYNE: Oh, there's no doubt. Obviously, Japan has invested billions of dollars into break waters, flood gates—you know, because Japan has lived with tsunamis for hundreds of years and learned to live with them, and learned to be very aware that they could come at any moment.

Obviously, it was not enough. You see some of the areas, certain cities (INAUDIBLE) about one under a third of water, airport underwater. Obviously, it was not enough.

But, certainly, the amount of money and the effort put into preparations limited the damage here. Of course, we still don't know what the toll of this quake is. I mean, we won't know for several days.

MADDOW: Beyond immediate rescue efforts, what can you tell us about health and safety concerns for the general population now and moving into the weekend—things like power

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and clean water and communications?

LAYNE: Right. Well, communications is still a bit patchy, but phone communication is getting back. The Internet is for the most part there. Obviously, the devastated areas are in a more difficult—a more difficult spot.

Obviously, the rescue efforts are concentrating on getting food and water to the people that need them. Power was out for millions of people, and that's, you know, slowly getting back. But, obviously, that's a focus of the rescue efforts.

MADDOW: Do the authorities—do local government and the national government appear to have a disaster plan that accounts for disaster of this magnitude? Do they seem to be reacting in a fashion that is orderly, inspires confidence, and that seems capable of dealing with the massive challenges that Japan now faces?

LAYNE: Obviously, the challenge of this rescue is huge, and to what extent the government and the authorities have responded well to this—well, I think we won't really know until the final damage is known. But, certainly, in the initial hours, the response by the government did seem to be quite orderly. There was quick dissemination of information to the media about what was going on.

And even with this nuclear power plant issue, the government has at least—we don't know what we're dealing with right now quite yet, but the government has at least gotten in front

of the issue and is—appears to be trying to inform the public about the risks and the dangers.

MADDOW: I know that it may be hard to compare magnitude of concern given the disaster of this size and of this complexity—but in terms of that nuclear disaster, is there significant concern in Japan on top of everything else everybody is dealing with that that might be a whole new level of complication and risk for the people of Japan?

LAYNE: No doubt. There's a lot of concern right now about, you know, really what might happen.

We have experts saying that, you know, it's not going to be Chernobyl. That it could be contained. And even if there is a radioactive leak, you know, that it might not be really all that devastating.

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But who knows? And that's the scary part.

I think immediately there are more people in Japan that are dealing with the damage of the quake, and that's sort of the most important thing in front of them, that's—the tsunami, the impact of the earthquake itself as opposed to what might happen at the nuclear plant. But certainly, this is—this is front page news, and the media is all over this story, and for obvious reasons. The risk is huge.

MADDOW: Nathan Layne, "Reuters" Tokyo bureau chief, who I'm sure is exhausted at this point, having both lived through it and still covering it all these hours later—thanks for joining us and good luck with your continued coverage.

LAYNE: Thank you.

MADDOW: The tsunami that was generated by the earthquake in Japan reached Hawaii and the continental United States this morning. People there had lots of advanced warning that it was coming, and that is something that cannot be taken for granted. That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Aloha from Honolulu where we are under a tsunami watch.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: We are one block out of the evacuation zone.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Expect my mother to be calling soon.

(SIREN)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: This is so eerie.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It is eerie.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: That's what it was like on the big island of Hawaii early this morning where a tsunami warning was issued following the devastating earthquake off the coast of Japan.

Ultimately and thankfully, there was little damage when the waves hit Hawaii at about 3:00 a.m. local time. Officials then downgraded that warning to an advisory.

Tsunami warnings were also issued in California, in Oregon, and in Washington state.

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In northern California town of Crescent City, right up by the Oregon border, a man who was reportedly swept up by a wave in the Pacific Ocean, near the Klamath River, that man is now presumed dead after officials failed to locate his body.

He and two friends had reportedly gone to the shoreline to photograph the incoming tsunami waves. They were as high as 6 ½ feet. They did significant damage to the harbor and coastline in Crescent City.

More than six years after the Indian Ocean tsunami killed 230,000 people, tsunami warning systems around the world have taken on the highest levels of importance in terms of disaster preparedness and coordination. Tsunamis may be rare but they are massive.

The tsunami warning system in the Pacific is based in Hawaii. It includes 26 different member states. The goal is simple: to take data about the hundreds of earthquakes that strike every day and determine the likelihood that that seismic action could trigger a tsunami.

Here in the United States, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA, operates a system that's called DART, D-A-R-T. DART stands for Deep Ocean Assessment and Reporting of tsunamis. DART is a network of 39 stations out at sea, anchored to the bottom of the sea floor. Up on the ocean surface is a buoy that gathers information about temperature and pressure and sends it back to be analyzed four times an hour.

Using anchors and buoys information, the system determines essentially the height of the water, and if the buoys detect some unusual event, they ramp up the frequency with which they send back their information to home base—they ramp it up to four times a minute.

As important and life-saving as this tsunami early warning systems are, they are also facing severe budget cuts. The spending plan approved by the Republican-controlled House last month would cut the budgets of the organizations that run the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii by almost 30 percent.

We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: Nearly a third of all Japan's energy comes from the nuclear power. There are 55 different nuclear plants across the country, all

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of which have multiple reactors.

Two of the nuclear plants in Japan are in a state of emergency tonight after a massive 8.9 earthquake and subsequent tsunami not only knocked out power to the cooling systems that prevent the nuclear core and those reactors from melting down, but they also then knocked out backup systems as well. They've been working on battery-powered, double-back generators. They've been trying to restore full power ever since.

At the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant where two reactors are in trouble, radiation levels inside the control room are reportedly 1,000 times normal levels. Radiation levels at the gates of that facility are reported to be eight times the normal. Authorities told an estimated 45,000 people in a six-mile radius around that plant that they needed to evacuate. This is in one of the hardest-hit areas of Japan.

They had vented some of the vapor from the reactor in order to relieve the pressure. That does release radiation into the atmosphere, but they're hoping the cure is better than the disease.

To the south of that facility, at the Daini plant, three reactors are in a declared emergency situation there. Authorities there have now told an estimated 3,000 people within a two-mile radius of that plant to evacuate while they consider whether to release some of the radioactive vapor from those reactors as well.

So, far, the Japanese government says it can contain the nuclear meltdown threat.

But President Obama made it clear today that the United States is standing by to help.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I've asked Steve Chu, our energy secretary, to be in close contact with their personnel to provide any assistance that's necessary, but also to make sure that if, in fact, there are breaches in the safety system on these nuclear plants, that they're dealt with right away.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: Joining us now is Joe Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, a global security foundation. And full disclosure, my friend.

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Joe, I wanted to talk with you about this all day today, at least as soon as I realized how serious it is. Thanks for your time, man.

JOE CIRINCIONE, PLOUGHSHARES FUND: My pleasure, Rachel.

MADDOW: How—you are not a guy who gets easily worried, I know. How worried are you about the situation in Japan? How confident are you that the nuclear energy world knows how to resolve some like this?

CIRINCIONE: I am very worried and I'm getting increasingly worried. And part of that worry is we're not getting very good information out of Tokyo Electric Power Company. It's not really clear what's happening. They maybe have retained control over the cooling systems of these two reactors. But what happened all day is that they have assured us that the situation is under control, and then they released another statement that indicates it's not in control at all.

We have never seen something like this. We have never seen multiple reactors at risk. We have at least two reactors that they say at the Daiichi site that are having coolant problems. There's another three reactors that you say at the Daini site that are also at risk. Nothing like this has ever happened in the nuclear power industry. We are in uncharted territory.

MADDOW: In terms of worst-case scenario—I don't know much about nuclear disaster, but I think I know that Chernobyl did not have a containment facility around their reactors.

That blew up. And these Japanese reactors do.

Is that reason to think of this as a qualitatively different thing? Should we stop invoking Chernobyl because it's too different than even the worst-case scenario here?

CIRINCIONE: Most experts are not thinking there's that great risk of explosion at these sites, but it could happen if the containment vessel gets too much pressure built up. As you noted on the show, they now have two times the design pressure building up inside these containment vessels. So, it's not out of the question. It's just considered unlikely at this point.

And as Ed Lyman said before in the show, that was a very hot explosion, a very high plume of radioactive material. So, probably nothing of that magnitude. It's more like a Three Mile Island scenario, in these boiling water reactors where the core melts and will drop through

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the containment vessel.

And then you want to make sure that the concrete which is feet thick can contain that molten core. If that fails, then that is really the worst-case scenario that the entire containment structure collapses. And then we're talking about massive releases of highly radioactive material.

MADDOW: And the highly radioactive material that would be released in a case like that would be released in a gaseous form? I mean, in a form of a radioactive cloud that could then move?

CIRINCIONE: Absolutely. Once this hot material starts hitting the atmosphere, starts hitting other structures, you're getting fires, you're getting smoke, you're particulates, and then, of course, you have ground contamination. We've never actually seen something like this happened. They stopped Three Mile Island before it got to that stage.

We have to all hope that the Tokyo officials know what they're doing, that they're able to contain this, that the generators are being rushed in there, can get online. We're going to know in the next few hours whether this situation will be under control. We should know by tomorrow morning just how bad it is, if we can get the nuclear power industry to actually give us up-to-date information.

MADDOW: In terms of these next few hours, and as you say, we're not going to know how this is going to resolve. And the best case, for

now, for the next few hours—is the evacuation, so far, the six-mile radius they've drawn, thousands of people moved under very difficult circumstances, is that—does that seem appropriate to you in terms of protecting the population there?

CIRINCIONE: That is—that is a minimum evacuation scenario that you would want. It depends. You know, if you're just having release of radioactive steam, that's not supposed to happen, that you don't like that, no amount of radioactivity is safe, but then that radiation—that evacuation scenario makes sense.

If you're going to talk about massive releases of more radioactive steam, then we really would be talking about hundreds of square kilometers you would like to evacuate. Fortunately, these are close to the sea. The winds are blowing west to west. So, it will blow most of the radioactivity out to sea. And, of

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course, in a catastrophe, it will blow all that radioactive material over to the West Coast of the United States.

MADDOW: Are there international resources that could be brought to bear on this that would make a difference? Or is Japan as good as anyone at dealing with this technology?

CIRINCIONE: Japan is very good. These reactors are generally considered in Japan in the state of the art. These are particularly old designs, but they have relatively high construction standards for their reactors. IAEA can be brought in to help on this. And in the case of airlift, which is what the president was talking about today, the United States could help lift things like generators, backup power supplies to these.

This really should be an all hands on deck exercise. As bad as the natural disaster was today and still is today in Japan, this could be a technological catastrophe here. For my money, this is the most important part of this tsunami crisis to be focusing on right now.

MADDOW: It is also the thing that could turn this tragedy and disaster in Japan into international tragedy.

Joe Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund—you are smart and lucid about these things at a time when we really need that. Thanks, Joe.

CIRINCIONE: Thank you, Rachel.

MADDOW: Most of our tension has been on Japan where it remains, frankly. There is however one other story—a story about the U. S. and terrorism that we as a show decided tonight—decided that it bears telling, even on this night with everything else that's going on in Japan. We will be back with that in just a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: There is an important update to the story of an attempted bombing of a Martin Luther King Day parade in Spokane, Washington, today. Now, there's been an arrest. And information we have on the man who was arrested is exactly what everyone was worried about when we first heard about that attempted bombing. There's also been an interesting potential domestic terrorism series of arrests in Alaska today. We have details ahead.

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(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: Interrupting our on-going Japan coverage for just a moment now to bring you a domestic news story we wanted to make sure we got on the air tonight.

Authorities in Alaska say they have arrested five people for allegedly plotting to kill multiple Alaska state troopers and a federal judge. One of the suspects is this man, Francis “Schaeffer” Cox, the founder and leader of an Alaska militia group. He’s former candidate for Alaska state legislature and he is an outspoken guns advocate.

Fairbanks police chief says the arrests yesterday targeted members of the Sovereign Citizens Movement. It’s described by the FBI as a domestic terrorist movement. So-called Sovereign citizens are anti-government extremist who believe they’re not subject to federal, state, or local laws and many of them preach violent resistance to any form of governmental authority.

Scott Roeder who killed abortion provider, Dr. George Tiller, in 2009 -- he was linked to the Sovereign Citizens Movement—as was Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh’s associate Terry Nichols, as was a man named Jerry Kane, who along with his 16-year-old son killed two Arkansas police officers and wounded two others last year before they themselves were killed by police.

Also, there has been an arrest this week in the Spokane, Washington, Martin Luther King Day

bomb, which was feared to be linked to the white supremacist movement responsible for other bombings in the Pacific Northwest in years past. In January 17th this year, what was later described by authorities as sophisticated and, quote, “very lethal bomb,” was found on a bench in a backpack along the planned route of the Martin Luther King Day parade in Spokane. The bomb didn’t go off because a handful of local workers found it before the start of the parade and reported it, and the bomb squad was able to diffuse the device in time.

Yesterday, in rural Washington—excuse me—two days ago in Washington state, about 70 miles outside Spokane, federal agents arrested a suspect in that bombing attempt near his home. This is well north of Spokane.

You may remember that along with the bomb that ultimately did not go off, two t-shirts were found inside the backpack along the Spokane

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parade route. Those t-shirts were tied to events from the area where the suspect was arrested on Wednesday. The suspect is a 36-year-old man named Kevin Harpham.

A spokesman at Fort Lewis, which is now Joint Base Lewis McChord, confirmed to “The Seattle Times” this week that Mr. Harpham had served in the Army and was stationed at Fort Lewis between 1996 and 1999.

The complaint against Mr. Harpham this week charges that he attempted to use a weapon of mass destruction, an improvised explosive device, placed prior to along the planned route of the Martin Luther King Jr. unity march. This man is also charged with possession of an unregistered explosive device. He is facing life in prison.

A federal law enforcement official speaking about the case anonymously to “The New York Times” said it’s unclear at this point whether the perpetrator acted alone. The source also said Mr. Harpham could eventually face more charges.

The arrest documents are sealed but an anonymous source described as familiar with the investigation by “The Seattle Times” told that paper that authorities were able to link Mr. Harpham to purchases of bomb components, including a remote car starter and other electronics. And that at least one purchase was made with a debit card.

The source also says DNA recovered in the backpack or on the bomb was linked to Mr.

Harpham.

The day after the attempted bombing in January, the FBI special agent in charge of the Spokane FBI office told “The Spokesman-Review” that the bomb appeared to have been, quote, “a viable device that was very lethal and had the potential to inflict multiple casualties.” But he also talked about potential motive saying, quote, “I think the link to the Martin Luther King celebration and march is inescapable. At that point, it falls directly in the realm and sphere of domestic terrorism. Clearly there was some political or social agenda here.”

That was what the FBI was saying about this attempted bombing in its immediate aftermath. Now, with the suspect in custody, federal authorities are saying essentially nothing about any potential motive, racial or otherwise.

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But, the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that tracks hate groups, says that its own research shows that the man arrested was a member of a white supremacists group called the National Alliance in late 2004. The National Alliance is happy for you to know that they are in fact a white supremacists group but they are denying that Mr. Harpham was ever a member.

If you know one thing about this group, National Alliance, other than its connection to this case, what you probably know is about its founder. National Alliance was founded by a man named William Pierce. William Pierce is dead now. He is less famous for starting a white supremacists group than he is for writing a white supremacists novel called “The Turner Diaries.”

“The Turner Diaries” describes a violent overthrow of the United States government by white supremacists. Clippings from “The Turner Diaries” were found in the car that Timothy McVeigh was driving when he was arrested after bombing the federal building in Oklahoma City. The book is believed to be part of Mr. McVeigh’s inspiration for that crime.

Although authorities are not commenting on links between the suspect arrested in the Spokane bombing yesterday and white supremacists organizations, reporter Thomas Clouse with “The Spokesman-Review” newspaper said today—excuse me—said yesterday that “investigators believe Mr. Harpham posted more than a thousand entries talking about a race war and bombs on a racist

Internet forum.” The paper reports that authorities will not publicly confirm it but they believe Kevin Harpham was posting to a site called the Vanguard News Network.

If they’re right about him using that site and they’re right about what screen name he was using at that site, then this November 2004, entry is from him. Quote, “In the Army, my lieutenant told me Timothy McVeigh read ‘The Turner Diaries’ and that there was a blueprint for a truck bomb in it. After I was out of the service and was getting to the point of advanced antigovernment libertarianism, I bought the book and when I was finished I was extremely disappointed that there was no plans for a bomb inside.”

When Kevin Harpham appeared in court this week, he acknowledged that he understands the charges against him and waived his bail hearing. A grand jury will meet later this month to decide if there’s enough evidence to

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indict him. And in the meantime, he will stay in custody.

We were the first news outlet to give this story significant national attention. We will continue to track it and we'll keep you posted.

We'll also be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: At this hour, it is late morning in Japan well into what is now the day after the biggest earthquake ever recorded in that country. In the bright light of day, there is revealing the full extent of damage from the 8.9 magnitude earthquake -- 8.9.

To put that in perspective, the U.S. Geological Survey says a magnitude 9 earthquake is equivalent to the force of 25,000 nuclear bombs. You know, that massive earthquake that devastated Christchurch, New Zealand, last month—scientists say this one, the one in Japan, was nearly 8,000 times stronger than the one that hit New Zealand.

There's also the tsunami that the earthquake triggered which sent a 30-foot wall of water—not just water but water and mud washing across low-lying coastal areas of Japan. Entire towns were swept away.

Rescue efforts are now in top gear. Kyoto news agency reporting in one of the worst hit residential areas people buried under rubble can now be heard calling for help.

And now, even given how immense this disaster is, I almost can't believe I'm saying it, but the potential for even greater disaster is still unfolding. Workers at two of Japan's nuclear power plants are struggling to prevent nuclear meltdowns in five different reactors in which the cooling systems have failed or are operating on their failsafe, failsafe systems—two power plants, five reactors.

This is the Fukushima Daiichi plant in northeastern Japan where it

was originally believed that only one reactor had been affected. But the

Tokyo Electric Power Company later confirmed that cooling ability had also

been lost in three reactors at the nearby Daini plant—seen on this map -

as well as at a second reactor at Daiichi. So,

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altogether, five reactors are in a state of emergency in Japan in danger of melting down.

It is the first time ever that the Japanese government has declared a state of emergency for a nuclear power plant, let alone two of them at once, each involving multiple reactor failures.

The prime minister of Japan was seen departing Tokyo on his way to visit the nuclear plant just hours ago. There's lots more that still unknown at this hour. Authorities say the roads are too badly damaged to allow them to yet reach one area along the coast where it's believed that up to 300 people were killed at the shore line.

Hundreds of people are missing. The number of people reported injured has already reached nearly 1,000, and the search for the dead and the trapped and the missing is frankly just beginning.

That does it for us tonight. We'll see you on Monday. Good night.

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