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U.S. Sees Array of New Threats at Japan's Nuclear Plant

By JAMES GLANZ and WILLIAM J. BROAD
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United States government engineers sent to help with the crisis in [Japan](#) are warning that the troubled nuclear plant there is facing a wide array of fresh threats that could persist indefinitely, and that in some cases are expected to increase as a result of the very measures being taken to keep the plant stable, according to a confidential assessment prepared by the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#).



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Among the new threats that were cited in the assessment, dated March 26, are the mounting stresses placed on the containment structures as they fill with radioactive cooling water, making them more vulnerable to rupture in one of the aftershocks rattling the site after the earthquake and tsunami of March 11. The document also cites the possibility of explosions inside the containment structures due to the release of hydrogen and oxygen from seawater pumped into the reactors, and offers new details on how semimolten fuel rods and salt buildup are impeding the flow of fresh water meant to cool the nuclear cores.

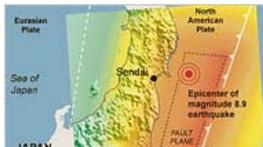
In recent days, workers have grappled with several side effects of the emergency measures taken to keep nuclear fuel at the plant from overheating, including leaks of radioactive water at the site and radiation burns to workers who step into the water. The assessment, as well as interviews with officials familiar with it, points to a new panoply of complex challenges that water creates for the safety of workers and the recovery and long-term stability of the reactors.

While the assessment does not speculate on the likelihood of new explosions or damage from an aftershock, either could lead to a breach of the containment structures in one or more of the crippled reactors, the last barriers that prevent a much more serious release of radiation from the nuclear core. If the fuel continues to heat and melt because of ineffective cooling, some nuclear experts say, that could also leave a radioactive mass that could stay molten for an extended period.

The document, which was obtained by The New York Times, provides a more detailed technical assessment than Japanese officials have provided of the conundrum facing

Workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear station are dealing with new challenges.

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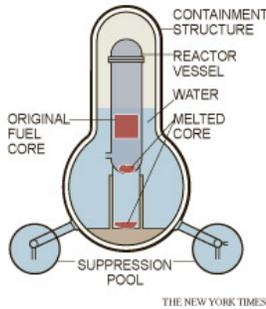
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Fresh Threats

A document prepared by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission describes stresses placed on containment structures as they fill with cooling water, making them more vulnerable to rupture in one of the aftershocks near the site. Below, the worst-case situation would be if the water rose above the fuel level.



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the Japanese as they struggle to prevent more fuel from melting at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. But it appears to rely largely on data shared with American experts by the Japanese.

Among other problems, the document raises new questions about whether pouring water on nuclear fuel in the absence of functioning cooling systems can be sustained indefinitely. Experts have said the Japanese need to continue to keep the fuel cool for many months until the plant can be stabilized, but there is growing awareness that the risks of pumping water on the fuel present a whole new category of challenges that the nuclear industry is only beginning to comprehend.

The document also suggests that fragments or particles of nuclear fuel from spent fuel pools above the reactors were blown "up to one mile from the units," and that pieces of highly radioactive material fell between two units and had to be "bulldozed over," presumably to protect workers at the site. The ejection of nuclear material, which may have occurred during one of the earlier hydrogen explosions, may indicate more extensive damage to the extremely radioactive pools than previously disclosed.

David A. Lochbaum, a nuclear engineer who worked on the kinds of General Electric reactors used in Japan and now directs the nuclear safety project at the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), said that the welter of problems revealed in the document at three separate reactors made a successful outcome even more uncertain.

"I thought they were, not out of the woods, but at least at the edge of the woods," said Mr. Lochbaum, who was not involved in preparing the document. "This paints a very different picture, and suggests that things are a lot worse. They could still have more damage in a big way if some of these things don't work out for them."

The steps recommended by the nuclear commission include injecting nitrogen, an inert gas, into the containment structures in an attempt to purge them of hydrogen and oxygen, which could combine to produce explosions. The document also recommends that engineers continue adding boron to cooling water to help prevent the cores from restarting the nuclear reaction, a process known as criticality.

Even so, the engineers who prepared the document do not believe that a resumption of criticality is an immediate likelihood, Neil Wilmshurst, vice president of the nuclear sector at the Electric Power Research Institute, said when contacted about the document. "I have seen no data to suggest that there is criticality ongoing," said Mr. Wilmshurst, who was involved in the assessment.

The document was prepared for the commission's Reactor Safety Team, which is assisting the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, which owns the plant. It says it is based on the "most recent available data" from numerous Japanese and American organizations, including the electric power company, the Japan Atomic Industrial Forum, the [United States Department of Energy](#), General Electric and the Electric Power Research Institute, an independent, nonprofit group.

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Henry Fountain contributed reporting from New York, and Matthew L. Wald from Washington.

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