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

By **JAMES GLANZ** and **WILLIAM J. BROAD**

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](#).

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 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.

The document contains detailed assessments of each of the plant's six reactors along with recommendations for action. Nuclear experts familiar with the assessment said that it was regularly updated but that over all, the March 26 version closely reflected current thinking.

The assessment provides graphic new detail on the conditions of the damaged cores in reactors 1, 2 and 3. Because slumping fuel and salt from seawater that had been used as a coolant is probably blocking circulation pathways, the water flow in No. 1 "is severely restricted and likely blocked." Inside the core itself, "there is likely no water level," the assessment says, adding that as a result, "it is difficult to determine how much cooling is getting to the fuel." Similar problems exist in No. 2 and No. 3, although the blockage is probably less severe, the assessment says.

Some of the salt may have been washed away in the past week with the switch from seawater to fresh water cooling, nuclear experts said.

A rise in the water level of the containment structures has often been depicted as a possible way to immerse and cool the fuel. The assessment, however, warns that "when flooding containment, consider the implications of water weight on seismic capability of containment."

Experts in nuclear plant design say that this warning refers to the enormous stress put on the containment structures by the rising water. The more water in the structures, the more easily a large aftershock could rupture one of them.

Margaret Harding, a former reactor designer for General Electric, warned of aftershocks and said, "If I were in the Japanese's shoes, I'd be very reluctant to have tons and tons of water sitting in a containment whose structural integrity hasn't been checked since the earthquake."

The N.R.C. document also expressed concern about the potential for a "hazardous atmosphere" in the concrete-and-steel containment structures because of the release of hydrogen and oxygen from the seawater in a highly radioactive environment.

Hydrogen explosions in the first few days of the disaster heavily damaged several reactor buildings and in one case may have damaged a containment structure. That hydrogen was produced by a mechanism involving the metal cladding of the nuclear fuel. The document urged that Japanese operators restore the ability to purge the structures of these gases and fill them with stable nitrogen gas, a capability lost after the quake and tsunami.

Nuclear experts say that radiation from the core of a reactor can split water molecules in two, releasing hydrogen. Mr. Wilmschurst said that since the March 26 document, engineers had calculated that the amount of hydrogen produced would be small. But Jay A. LaVerne, a physicist at Notre Dame, said that at least near the fuel rods, some hydrogen would in fact be produced, and could react with oxygen. "If so," Mr. LaVerne said in an interview, "you have an explosive mixture being formed near the fuel rods."

Nuclear engineers have warned in recent days that the pools outside the containment buildings that hold spent fuel rods could pose an even greater danger than the melted reactor cores. The pools, which sit atop the reactor buildings and are meant to keep spent fuel submerged in water, have lost their cooling systems.

The N.R.C. report suggests that the fuel pool of the No. 4 reactor suffered a hydrogen explosion early in the Japanese crisis and could have shed much radioactive material into the environment, what it calls "a major source term release."

Experts worry about the fuel pools because explosions have torn away their roofs and exposed their radioactive contents. By contrast, reactors have strong containment vessels that stand a better chance of bottling up radiation from a meltdown of the fuel in the reactor core.

"Even the best juggler in the world can get too many balls up in the air," Mr. Lochbaum said of the multiplicity of problems at the plant. "They've got a lot of nasty things to negotiate in the future, and one missed step could make the situation much, much worse."

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

