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Japan Nuclear Crisis: Plant To Stop Pumping Radioactive Water Into Sea

Posted: 04/ 8/11 11:52 PM ET

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April 9, 2011 1:28:50 AM

By Shinichi Saoshiro and Chisa Fujioka

TOKYO, April 9 (Reuters) - Japan expects to stop pumping radioactive water into the sea from a crippled nuclear plant on Saturday, a day after China expressed concern at the action, reflecting growing international unease over the month-long nuclear crisis.

"The emptying out of the relatively low radiation water is expected to finish tomorrow," a Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) official said late on Friday.

TEPCO is struggling to contain the worst atomic crisis since Chernobyl, with its engineers pumping low-level radioactive seawater, used to cool overheated fuel rods, back into the sea for the past five days due to a lack of storage capacity.

Engineers say they are far from in control of the damaged reactors and it could take months to stabilise them and years to clear up the toxic mess left behind.

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Nuclear reactor maker Toshiba Corp has proposed a 10-year plan to decommission four of the six damaged reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, 240 km (150 miles) north of Tokyo, said Kyodo news agency.

But the government has said it was too early to have a "specific road map" for ending the nuclear crisis.

The magnitude 9 earthquake and tsunami on March 11 left 28,000 people dead or missing, and northeastern Japan a splintered wreck.

GLOBAL RADIATION CONCERNS

Several countries have restricted food imports from Japan over radiation fears as Japan's economy reels from the country's worst disaster since World War Two. Disruptions to Japanese supply chains are reverberating around the world.

China will ban imports of farm produce, including food and feedstuff, from 12 areas in Japan, the official Xinhua news agency said on Saturday. It did not identify the 12 areas.

China said earlier it had detected 10 cases of ships, aircraft or cargo arriving from Japan with higher than normal levels of radiation since mid-March.

Xinhua reported earlier that trace levels of radioactivity had been detected in 22 Chinese provinces.

On Friday, China said it would closely monitor Japan's actions to regain control of the plant and demanded Tokyo provide swift and accurate information on the crisis.

South Korea has also criticised Japan, accusing it of incompetence for failing to notify its neighbours that it would pump radioactive water into the sea.

Radiation from Japan spread around the entire northern hemisphere in the first two weeks of the nuclear crisis, according to the Vienna-based Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO).

CTBTO's 30 monitoring stations detected minute levels of radiation in North America after three days, in Europe after 12 days and the entire northern hemisphere after 15 days.

TEPCO said it was continuing to inject nitrogen into one of the reactors to prevent a repeat of last month's hydrogen explosions, which would release highly radioactive particles.

ECONOMY REELING

The world's third largest economy is now in a "severe condition", the government said on Friday.

Finance leaders of the G20 group of countries will ask Tokyo for a plan to resuscitate its economy as they see the damage from the earthquake as a risk to global growth, Takatoshi Kato, a former IMF deputy managing director, told Reuters on Friday.

Automaker Toyota Motor Corp plans to idle some of U.S. plants late in April, while Honda Motor Co Ltd has extended reduced U.S. production until April 22.

Power blackouts and restrictions, factory shutdowns, and a sharp drop in tourists have hit the world's most indebted nation, which is facing a damages bill as high as \$300 billion, making it by far the world's costliest natural disaster.

Economists expect Japan to slip into recession this year.

"Japan's economy is suddenly in a severe condition due to the effects of the earthquake," said the Cabinet Office after releasing a survey of hotel and restaurant staff and taxi drivers, showing a record fall in confidence to levels last seen during the depths of the global financial crisis.

In an obvious sign of the downturn, taxis park in long lines in central Tokyo each night, their drivers staying warm by idling the motor as they wait forlornly for a fare.

A major aftershock on Thursday forced two companies, including electronics giant Sony Corp, to stop production because of power cuts.

On a brighter note, Japan's top automakers Toyota and Nissan Motor Co said they planned to resume production at all domestic factories in stages starting on Monday, although output levels would be at half of original plans. (\$1=85.475 Japanese yen) (Additional reporting by Mayumi Negishi, Yoko Nishikawa, Kiyoshi Takenaka, Leika Kihara and Chang-Ran Kim in Tokyo, Ben Blanchard and Sui-lee Wee in Beijing, Jacqueline Wong in Shanghai, Jack Kim in Seoul; Writing by Michael Perry; Editing by Robert Birsell)

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