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Meltdown may be occurring at nuclear plant, Japanese official says

'There is a possibility, we see the possibility of a meltdown,' an official with Japan's nuclear agency says in an interview with CNN, adding that he is basing this on radioactivity measurements near the plant Saturday night. But the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. tells CNN that there's no evidence of a meltdown.

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
March 12, 2011 | 3:52 p.m.

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A meltdown may be occurring at one of the reactors at an earthquake-damaged nuclear power plant in northeast Japan, a government official told CNN Sunday morning Japan time.

"There is a possibility, we see the possibility of a meltdown," said Toshihiro Bannai, director of the international affairs office of Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety, in a telephone interview with CNN from the agency's Tokyo headquarters. "At this point, we have still not confirmed that there is an actual meltdown, but there is a possibility."

Bannai said engineers have been unable to get close enough to the reactor's core to know what's going on, and that he based his conclusion on radioactive cesium and iodine measured in the air near the plant Saturday night.

Photos: Scenes from the earthquake

"What we have seen is only the slight indication from a monitoring post of cesium and iodine," he told CNN. Plant officials have since injected seawater and boron into the plant in an effort to cool its nuclear fuel.

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"We have some confidence, to some extent, to make the situation to be stable status," Bannai said on CNN. "We actually have very good confidence that we will resolve this."

But Japan's ambassador to the United States insisted there was no evidence of a nuclear meltdown at the plant.

Videos of the earthquake

"There was a concern about this reactor. We have confirmed that there was a blowup but it was not a blowup of reactor nor container. It was a blowup of the outer building so there was no leakage of the radioactive material," Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki told CNN's Wolf Blitzer.

"We are now trying to cope with the situation by putting saltwater into the reactor," he said. "There

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are some other issues with other reactors as well, which need also injection of water or taking out vapor because of increasing pressure into the container and we are now working on it."

When asked if there may be a nuclear meltdown, Fujisaki told Blitzer, "We do not see any evidence of that at this time."

The Fire and Disaster Management Agency announced Sunday that 15 patients and an ambulance were exposed to radiation at a hospital within seven miles of the plant, Kyodo News Agency reported.

A state of emergency has been declared for the reactor and two of the other five reactors at the same complex, he said, and three are in a safe, shut-down state.

"The other two still have some cooling systems, but not enough capacity," he said.

News of the possible meltdown came as rescue efforts resumed Sunday morning in areas devastated by the magnitude 8.9 quake and subsequent tsunami.

While the official death toll from Japan's National Police Agency was 686, the actual toll is likely higher, with Japanese public broadcaster NHK reporting more than 900 dead.

Photos: Scenes from the earthquake

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BradNaksuthin at 6:46 PM March 12, 2011

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meltdown disaster is the answer.

MarkBlocker at 6:43 PM March 12, 2011

God stand closely with the atomic workers in Japan putting themselves in harm's way for the safety of the people. In this day when corporate-owned media attack workers, the actions of these brave individuals are proof that the brave walk among us. Their detractors at the microphones and keyboards of the media attempting to break union solidarity pale in light of self sacrifice.

SylvainPimpare at 5:19 PM March 12, 2011

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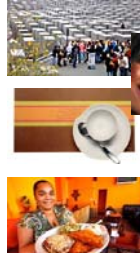
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