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Japan reportedly to rate nuclear crisis at highest level

By Chico Harlan, Monday, April 11, 9:30 PM

TOKYO — Japanese authorities planned Tuesday to raise their rating of the severity of the [Fukushima Daiichi nuclear crisis](#) to the highest level on an international scale, equal to that of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, according to the Kyodo news agency.

Officials reclassified the ongoing emergency from level 5, an “accident with off-site risk,” to level 7, a “major accident.” The reassessment comes at a time when the International Atomic Energy Agency says the plant is showing “early signs of recovery” but still in a critical condition.

The plant’s debilitated reactors face constant threat of strong aftershocks, and the latest on Tuesday morning — a 6.4-magnitude temblor — caused a brief fire at a water sampling facility near Daiichi’s No. 4 reactor. The Tokyo Electric Power Co., which operates the facility, said that the critical process used to cool the hot fuel rods had not been interrupted, and radiation levels showed no signs of change.

A level 7 accident, according to the [International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale](#), is typified by a “major release of radioactive material with widespread health and environmental effects.”

Previously only Chernobyl had been given a 7 rating. The 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident in Pennsylvania was rated a level 5 incident.

Contamination from Fukushima Daiichi still does not match that of the Chernobyl accident, but it has

already prompted the [evacuation of tens of thousands](#) who live within 19 miles of the plant. Japan's government had initially called for a mandatory evacuation within a 12-mile radius. But Japan on Monday [widened its evacuation zone](#), selecting certain towns within 19 miles — those with higher radiation readings — for mandatory evacuation.

According to Kyodo, Japan's Nuclear Safety Commission reported Monday that the plant, at one point after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, had been releasing 10,000 terabecquerels of radioactivity per hour. The report did not specify when those radiation readings occurred. A release of tens of thousands of terabecquerels per hour, though, corresponds with the radiation leakage level that the IAEA uses as a minimum benchmark for a level 7 accident.

“This corresponds to a large fraction of the core inventory of a power reactor, typically involving a mixture of short- and long-lived radionuclides,” an IAEA document says. “With such a release, stochastic health effects over a wide area, perhaps involving more than one country, are expected.”

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