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Japan nuclear blast: Government confirms problems at another reactor

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TOKYO: Japan's government confirmed on Monday that there were problems at the Fukushima Daiichi plant No.2 reactor. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said water levels at the reactor were falling.

A hydrogen explosion rocked the nuclear power plant earlier on Monday where authorities have been scrambling to avert a meltdown following Friday's massive earthquake and tsunami.

Crucially, the thick walls appear to be intact around the radioactive cores of the damaged reactors in the nuclear power complex north of Tokyo.

Rescue workers are combing the tsunami-battered northeast for survivors and trying to care for the millions without power or water in Japan's worst crisis since World War Two, that has likely killed at least 10,000 people.

Kyodo news agency reported that 2,000 bodies had been found in two coastal towns alone.

Some analysts said the damage caused by the disaster was so severe and the potential cost was so high -- by one estimate over \$170 billion in just the area directly hit -- that it could even tip Japan's economy back into recession.

The big fear now is of a major radiation leak from the nuclear complex in Fukushima, 240 km (150 miles) north of Tokyo, where engineers have been battling since the weekend to prevent a meltdown in three reactors.

The core container of the No. 3 reactor was intact after the explosion, the government said, but it warned those still in the 20-km (13-mile) evacuation zone to stay indoors. The plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO), said 11 people had been injured in the blast.

"Everything I've seen says that the containment structure is operating as it's designed to operate. It's keeping the radiation in and it's holding everything in,

which is the good news," said Murray Jennex, of San Diego State University.

"This is nothing like a Chernobyl... At Chernobyl (in the Ukraine in 1986) you had no containment structure --

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when it blew, it blew everything straight out into the atmosphere."

A Japanese official said before the blast that 22 people were confirmed to have suffered radiation contamination and up to 190 may have been exposed. Workers in protective clothing used hand-held scanners to check people arriving at evacuation centres.

U.S. warships and planes helping with relief efforts moved away from the coast temporarily because of low-level radiation. The U.S. Seventh Fleet described the move as precautionary.

The Singapore food authority announced it would begin testing imported Japanese produce for radiation.

NO POWER, NO WATER

Almost 2 million households were without power in the north, the government said. There were about 1.4 million without running water. Tens of thousands of people are missing.

In the town of Otsuchi in Iwate prefecture, 12,000 out of a population of 15,000 have disappeared.

"After my long career in the Red Cross where I have seen many disasters and catastrophes, this is the worst I have ever seen. Otsuchi reminds me of Osaka and Tokyo after the Second World War when everything was destroyed and flattened," Japan Red Cross President Tadateru Konoe told Reuters during a visit to the coastal town.

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