

Japan still 'racing against the clock' to prevent nuclear meltdown at Fukushima

The head of the UN's nuclear safety body said Japan was still "racing against the clock" to prevent a meltdown at the Fukushima power plant after he arrived in the country for a first-hand briefing on the crisis.



Reactor No.4 at Fukushima, and its pool containing spent fuel rods, has been left open to the elements after an earlier explosion Photo: AP



By [Gordon Rayner \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/gordon-rayner/\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/gordon-rayner/), Chief Reporter

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Yukiya Amano, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said the situation remained "very grave" as workers continued their desperate attempts to spray water onto overheating fuel rods.

Engineers are now considering a "Chernobyl solution" involving encasing the damaged reactors at the plant in concrete, leaving the radioactive rods permanently entombed on the site.

For the second successive day, the IAEA said there had been "no significant worsening" of the situation at Fukushima.

Meanwhile the humanitarian crisis facing survivors of the tsunami continued to deteriorate, with freezing temperatures and food shortages putting lives in peril.

Increasing numbers of people are being forced to scavenge for food in the debris of their homes.

[Fukushima 50 fight nuclear fallout covered in duct tape](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/8390944/Japan-nuclear-crisis-Fukushima-50-fight-nuclear-fallout-covered-in-duct-tape.html)

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[Fears of Japan nuclear crisis spill into commercial property sector](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/constructionandproperty/8391575/Impact-of-Japan-earthquake-puts-property-fund-in-limbo.html)

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Dozens of elderly people have succumbed to hypothermia, with 287,000 households still without electricity, and rescuers are also struggling to get supplies of medicines to hospitals in the most isolated areas.

The official death toll has now reached 6,911, with another 10,692 missing.

Survivors and rescue workers stood in the snow to observe a minute's silence at 2.46pm local time, exactly one week after the earthquake struck.

Yukio Edano, Japan's chief cabinet secretary, admitted there had been mistakes made in the country's response to the crisis.

"In hindsight, we could have moved a little quicker in assessing the situation and coordinating all that information and provided it faster," he said.

Japan has now upgraded the accident at Fukushima from level four to level five out of seven on an international scale of nuclear accidents, putting it on a par with the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in the US in 1979.

Many nuclear experts have said for days that Fukushima is second only to the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the list of the world's worst nuclear accidents.

Workers at the plant continued using fire hoses to spray water into a pool containing spent fuel rods that boiled dry when the cooling system was knocked out by the tsunami.

The company which owns the plant said it hoped electricity would be restored to some of the reactors today, enabling it to restart the cooling system, after a temporary power line was put in.

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