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Tests detect radiation above limits for infants in Tokyo water

Tokyo (CNN) -- A top Japanese official urged residents of the nation's capital not to hoard bottled water Wednesday after Tokyo's government found that radioactive material in tap water had exceeded the limit considered safe for infants.

"We have to consider Miyagi and Iwate and other disaster-hit areas," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said. "I'd like to again urge consumers not to purchase more bottled water than they need."

Earlier Wednesday, Tokyo government officials advised residents not to give tap water to infants or use it in formula after tests at a purification plant detected higher levels of radioactive iodine.

The city's water agency said the spike was likely caused by problems at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, located 240 kilometers (150 miles) away.

Edano's words seemingly fell on deaf ears as Tokyo residents made a dash for bottled water.

"I did not know about the news at all. I saw the sudden increase in customers and learned about the contamination," said Seiji Sasaki, a grocery store owner.

He had 40 cases of water in his shop. They quickly sold out. Other stores and supermarkets also reported they had no water. A CNN cameraman visited three stores and found two cases of water remaining in only one, but those cases were snapped up quickly. However, the supply of bottled water was already limited following the earthquake.

"I cannot find water anywhere. All sold out and I can only place orders," lamented Harue Kamiya, a city resident.

Officials evacuated some workers at the plant Wednesday afternoon as a black plume of smoke billowed above one of the reactors, plant owner Tokyo Electric Power Co. said.

The company said it was unclear what was causing the smoke.

Workers have been scrambling to cool down fuel rods at the nuclear plant since a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and massive tsunami on March 11 knocked out cooling systems there.

Some radiation has been released, officials said, but it was unclear whether radiation levels spiked after the black smoke was spotted Wednesday. Japan's nuclear agency said radiation levels near the plant had not changed, public broadcaster NHK reported.

But in Tokyo, concerns over radiation surged.

Government samples taken Tuesday night found 210 becquerels of radioactive iodine per kilogram of water -- two times higher than the limit that the government considers safe for infants.

The amount of iodine detected was lower than the level considered safe for adults: 300 becquerels per kilogram.

A becquerel is a unit of radioactivity equal to one nuclear decay or other nuclear transformation per second.

"There's no immediate health threat," Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara told reporters, urging people to "stay calm."

Also Wednesday, Japan's government expanded food shipment restrictions after the health ministry said tests detected radioactive materials at levels exceeding legal limits in 11 types of vegetables grown near the Fukushima plant.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan asked Ibaraki Prefecture to suspend shipments of raw milk and parsley, Edano told reporters Wednesday.

And the government of Fukushima Prefecture told residents not to eat leafy vegetables, he added.

Edano said radiation levels in the food would not cause health problems right away, but if radiation rises "we are looking at the possibility of levels reaching levels that may harm human health."

The decision to prohibit produce sales is another potentially devastating blow to a part of northeast Japan hit by the earthquake and tsunami.

Fukushima ranks among Japan's top producer of fruits, vegetables and rice. Ibaraki, south of Fukushima, supplies Tokyo with a significant amount of fruits and vegetables and is Japan's third-largest pork producer.

"This is our livelihood," a Fukushima farmer told Japanese television network TV Asahi. "It's a huge problem that we are unable to ship all our produce. We raised (this produce) with our own hands. It's unbearable that we would have to throw it all away."

Police say the dual disaster has killed at least 9,452 people and left at least 14,671 missing, many of them killed as a wall of water rushed in following the quake.

Meanwhile, about 387,000 evacuees are staying at 2,200 shelters, Japan's Kyodo News Agency reported. Relief efforts to help them and other victims continued, with U.S. military helicopters delivering food, clothes and supplies to some of the hardest hit areas.

In addition to the stories of people struggling to survive in quake-ravaged towns in northeastern Japan, the plight of workers braving high radiation levels to solve problems at the troubled plant has also drawn attention.

Tokyo Electric said Wednesday that two workers were injured at the plant while working with an electric panel. The workers, whose injuries did not involve exposure to radiation, were treated by a doctor at the nearby Fukushima Daini plant.

"We are constantly switching over all the time, since the work cannot be stopped," one worker told TV Asahi.

"It has settled down quite a lot compared to the beginning, and we could even begin to see a bright hope that maybe it would somehow work out in a little bit," another worker said in what the network touted as the first televised interviews with workers at the troubled plant.

But authorities said Wednesday that work was far from over at the plant.

The Tokyo Fire Department planned to start spraying water into the spent-fuel storage pool outside the plant's No.3 reactor Wednesday, said Hidehiko Nishiyama of Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency. Power has been restored in the control room at that reactor -- which officials say could be a key step in bringing cooling systems back online.

The No. 3 reactor has been a priority for authorities trying to contain damage to the plant and stave off a possible meltdown. Its fuel rods contain plutonium mixed with uranium, which experts say could cause more harm than regular uranium fuels in the event of a meltdown.

"We have progress in stabilizing cooling capacity. We most progressed in the No. 3 reactor," Edano said. "On the other hand, we are trying to figure out... the cause of the smoke."

With the nuclear plant's six reactors in various states of disrepair, concerns have mounted over a potentially larger release of radioactive material from the facility.

Efforts over the past several days have focused on restoring power at the facility while fire trucks and cement pumps sprayed water on spent fuel ponds, which contain used fuel rods with radioactive material.

CNN's Tim Schwarz and Ingrid Formanek contributed to this report.

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