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Nuclear crisis 'at Chernobyl level'

(UKPA) – 27 minutes ago

Japan has decided to raise the severity level of the crisis at its tsunami-stricken nuclear power plant to 7 - its highest and equal to the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union, reports have said.

Quoting sources at Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (Nisa), Kyodo News agency and public broadcaster NHK said Nisa would raise the severity level of the nuclear radiation disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant to 7 from the current 5.

Meanwhile, workers at the nuclear power complex discovered a small fire near a reactor building on Monday (8.38pm BST), but it was extinguished quickly, the plant's operator said. The setback was a further sign that the crisis at the plant has not abated.

Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco) which operates the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, said the fire at a box that contained batteries in a building near the No 4 reactor was discovered at about 6.38am on Tuesday, local time, and was put out seven minutes later.

It was not clear whether the fire was related to the magnitude-6.3 earthquake that shook the Tokyo area on Monday. The cause of the fire is being investigated. "The fire was extinguished immediately. It has no impact on Unit 4's cooling operations for the spent fuel rods," said Tepco spokesman Naoki Tsunoda.

The plant was damaged in the massive tsunami on March 11 that knocked out cooling systems and backup diesel generators, leading to explosions at three reactors and a fire at a fourth that was undergoing regular maintenance and was empty of fuel. The magnitude-9.0 earthquake that caused the tsunami immediately stopped the three reactors, but overheated cores and a lack of cooling functions led to further damage.

Engineers have been able to pump water into the damaged reactors to cool them down, but leaks have resulted in the pooling of tons of contaminated, radioactive water that has prevented workers from conducting further repairs.

Aftershocks on Monday briefly cut power to back-up pumps, halting the injection of cooling water for about 50 minutes before power was restored.

A month after the disaster, more than 145,000 people are still living in shelters, and the government has added five communities to a list of places people should leave to avoid long-term radiation exposure. A 12-mile radius has already been cleared around the plant.

The disaster is believed to have killed more than 25,000 people, but many of those bodies were swept out to sea and more than half of those feared dead are still listed as missing.

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