



Nuclear leak may exceed Chernobyl, Japan admits

BY JON SWAINE, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH APRIL 13, 2011



Buddist nun Jikou Yoshida pray at the devastated tsunami site in Minamisanriku, Miyagi prefecture on April 12, 2011.

Photograph by: YASUYOSHI CHIBA, AFP/Getty Images

Japanese officials have admitted that the nuclear crisis in Fukushima could become worse than Chernobyl.

The admission came after regulators Tuesday upgraded the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi plant to a seven on the International Atomic Energy Agency's accident scale - on a par with the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the worst ever.

Officials said the total leak from Fukushima so far amounted to a tenth of the radiation emitted from Chernobyl, but could yet eclipse the Ukraine disaster. An official from the plant operator, Tepco, said: "Our concern is that it could eventually exceed Chernobyl."

About 630,000 terabecquerels of radiation are estimated to have been leaked at Fukushima. More than five million were released at Chernobyl.

The decision to upgrade the accident to the highest threat level was the subject of international criticism after Japan admitted delaying the announcement.

A spokesman from Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) said the delay occurred because officials "refrained from making announcements until we had reliable data".

The admission led to calls from the international community for "swift and accurate" information about the true extent of the crisis.

The Japanese said the change was made after high total levels of radioactive contamination had been found in air, tap water, vegetables and seawater in the surrounding area.

The raising of the threat level prompted renewed fears among local people and international neighbours about the effects of exposure to radiation.

Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, said Tokyo must take "very seriously" the potential impact on his country and "swiftly, comprehensively and accurately report the situation to China". A further five communities have been added to the Japanese government's list of places that should be avoided. A 12-mile radius around the plant has already been evacuated.

Miyuki Ichisawa, 52, who runs a coffee shop in Iitate, one of the new danger zones, said: "It's very shocking to me now the government is telling us this accident is at the same level of Chernobyl." The new rating raised fresh questions about whether information was being withheld from the Japanese people. Tepco was frequently accused of falsifying safety data before last month's earthquake and tsunami.

Last week the Japanese government was reported to have withheld data showing that radiation exceeded safe levels more than 18 miles from the plant, beyond the established evacuation zone. Paddy Regan, a professor of physics at the University of Surrey, dismissed the comparison between Chernobyl and Fukushima. "The radiation released is a lot less, and the way it's released is very different," he said. "The Chernobyl fire put lots of radioactive material into the atmosphere and took it over large distances.

"Here, there have been a couple of releases where they've vented gas from the reactor, and then released some cooling water." Workers yesterday discovered a fire close to the No.4 Reactor at the plant but quickly extinguished it. Tepco said the fire was in a battery box and did not affect radiation levels.

The plant and much of northern and eastern Japan were jolted by two large aftershocks yesterday morning, following a magnitude 7 earthquake which killed three people on Monday.

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