

World News

Smoke at plant, radiation fears in Tokyo

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TOKYO, March 23 (UPI) -- Smoke and earlier quake jolts disrupted recovery work at Japan's crippled Fukushima nuclear plant Wednesday as radiation concerns spread to Tokyo.

Tokyo Electric Power Co., operator of the badly damaged Fukushima plant, was forced to evacuate its engineers working to restore power and critical cooling functions in some of the disabled reactors after smoke was seen coming out around 4:20 p.m. from the building housing the problematical No. 3 reactor.

In the capital, authorities issued an alert asking residents not to give tap water to infants after finding radioactive iodine levels in excess of legal limits for infants in a water purification plant, Kyodo News reported.

CNN reported the Tokyo government officials also asked residents not to use tap water in infant formula and quoted Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano as urging consumers not to stock bottle water more than required.

"There's no immediate health threat," Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara told reporters, CNN reported.

The Fukushima plant in northeast Japan is about 150 miles away from Tokyo and is at the center of the country's worst atomic crisis since World War II, set off March 11 by an unprecedented 9-magnitude earthquake and a 30-foot tsunami the quake unleashed which killed and left missing tens of thousands of people.

The cause of Wednesday's black smoke at the nuclear plant was not immediately clear but Tokyo Electric said it began to recede about an hour later, Kyodo reported. The government nuclear safety agency said it noticed no elevation of radiation levels as a result of the smoke.

Earlier Wednesday, earthquakes, likely aftershocks from the March 11 catastrophe, tormented northeastern Japan, including a magnitude-6 temblor shortly after 7 a.m. that threatened the Fukushima nuclear plant.

No tsunami warnings were issued after Wednesday's shocks, while the government Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency said the Fukushima plant suffered no additional damage, Kyodo News reported.

The other bad news Wednesday was a report from the Japanese health ministry that radioactive materials drastically over the legal limits had been found in 11 different vegetables including broccoli, cabbage, spinach and komatsuna, another leafy produce, grown in Fukushima Prefecture, Kyodo reported. The ministry asked residents not to consume the vegetables for the time being.

The discovery extended earlier government orders barring shipments of raw milk and spinach.

The work at the plant currently involves cooling down the disabled reactors' spent fuel rod pools to prevent catastrophic radiation leakages. Also, engineers need to restore pressure gauge instruments at No. 1, 2, 3 and 4 reactors.

More critically, engineers needed to bring back the cooling functions at No. 1, 2 and 3 reactors and in the pools storing spent fuel rods at No. 2, 3 and 4 units.

The utility Tuesday reported successfully reconnecting all the six reactors to external electric power, raising hopes that the cooling functions would be restored, although the U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency has said the overall situation at the site remained "very serious."

Also Tuesday, Kyodo quoted nuclear safety agency spokesman Hidehiko Nishiyama as welcoming the restoration of electric power at the reactors, adding a full-scale "meltdown" was now unlikely.

In the United States, the Food and Drug Administration Tuesday announced imports of all milk, milk products, fresh vegetables and fruit from areas near the nuclear plant would be suspended.

Japanese foreign ministry said as of Wednesday about 25 countries have either temporarily closed their embassies in Tokyo or relocated their functions to other areas in Japan because of radiation threats, Kyodo said.

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