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Radiation fears soar after nuke plant fire

BY ERIC TALMADGE AND SHINO YUASA
The Associated Press

SOMA, Japan — Dangerous levels of radiation leaking from a crippled nuclear plant forced Japan to order 140,000 people to seal themselves indoors Tuesday after an explosion and a fire dramatically escalated the crisis spawned by a deadly tsunami.

In a nationally televised statement, Prime Minister Naoto Kan said radiation had spread from the four stricken reactors of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant along Japan's northeastern coast. The region was shattered by Friday's 9.0-magnitude earthquake and the ensuing tsunami that is believed to have killed more than 10,000 people, plunged millions into misery and pummeled the world's third-largest economy.

Japanese officials told the International Atomic Energy Agency that the reactor fire was in a fuel storage pond — an area where used nuclear fuel is kept cool — and that "radioactivity is being released directly into the atmosphere."

Long after the fire was extinguished, a Japanese official said the pool might still be boiling, though the reported levels of radiation had dropped dramatically by the end of the day.

Late Tuesday, officials at the plant said they were considering asking for help from the U.S. and Japanese militaries to spray water from helicopters into the pool.

That reactor, Unit 4, had been shut down before the quake for maintenance.

If the water boils, it could evaporate, exposing the rods. The fuel rods are encased in safety containers meant to prevent them from resuming nuclear reactions, nuclear officials said. But they acknowledged that there could have been damage to the containers. They also confirmed that the walls of the storage pool building were damaged.

SEE RADIATION ON PAGE 4

'Time is the enemy. On the fifth day, survivability [of missing victims] drops significantly. On the seventh day, it becomes remote.'

Joe Knerr

task force leader for Virginia's Fairfax County Search and Rescue

Waning hope

U.S. rescue teams search for survivors in Ofunato **Page 3**



TRAVIS J. TRITTEN/Stars and Stripes

A Fairfax County, Va., search-and-rescue unit walks into the disaster zone Tuesday in Ofunato, Japan.

Survivors in Sendai brace for new threat

BY CHARLIE REED
Stars and Stripes

SENDAI, Japan — First they endured the earthquake. Then they scrambled to escape the tsunami.

Now the stricken survivors of the Sendai region are faced with trying to avoid yet another plague — potential radiation from the exploding Fukushima nuclear complex an hour to the south.

On Tuesday, as rescuers at ground zero of last week's unprecedented natural disaster continued pulling thousands of victims from the twisted wreckage and crumbled buildings near the coast, fears of possible radiation exposure were driving displaced survivors to start moving farther north.

A scrolling electronic sign at a local fire department read: "Stay calm. Let's help each other."

But Muniqi Muhammad, a native of Phoenix, Ariz., who lives in Sendai, was hastily boarding a bus to get out of town.

He said he and his girlfriend had decided to try to get out of Japan after hearing news that the situation at the failing nuclear plant was worsening.

Thousands lined up alongside them in front of the Miyagi prefectural headquarters building, hoping to get seats on the buses headed to Yamagata, about 20 miles to the west.

"That's the only place to go for now," said Muhammad, 40, an English teacher who has called Japan home for 13 years. "From there hopefully we can get to the airport in Osaka or Akita and get out of Japan."

Like many others interviewed, Muhammad said he did not trust official Japanese government reports that the nuclear crisis in Fukushima, 65 miles to the south, posed no serious health risks, especially after he watched officials on TV discuss radiation levels in terms of "legal limits."

"That's a risk I'm not willing to take," he said.

SEE MISERY ON PAGE 3

■ No plans to evacuate U.S. bases in Japan

■ Panic buying adds to supply shortages

■ Latest photos from our staff on scene

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For constant updates on the quake, go to stripes.com