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Nuclear Radiation in Japan: Warning from Japanese Economy Minister: “Don’t go outside. Close the windows. Stay indoors.”

By Mike Whitney
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News of a third explosion at the Fukushima nuclear power plant sent stocks plunging on the Nikkei exchange which dropped 1,015 points on the session. After 2 days of battering, the stock index is off more than 1,600 points in its worst performance since Lehman Brothers failed in September 2008.

Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan has ordered the evacuation of all people living within a 18 mile radius of the power station and warned homeowners to remain indoors to avoid contact with “elevated levels of radiation”.

“Substantial amounts of radiation are leaking in the area,” Kan said in an emergency broadcast on television at 0200 GMT.

Already, the disaster at Fukushima is the second biggest nuclear catastrophe on record, just behind Chernobyl, but reactor volatility suggests that the problem could persist for some time to come, perhaps months.

According to CBS News: “A fire at a fourth reactor in a quake-damaged nuclear plant sent radiation spewing into the atmosphere Tuesday. Earlier, a third explosion at the plant in four days damaged a critical steel containment structure around another reactor, as Japan’s nuclear radiation crisis escalates dramatically….

Making matters worse, the wind over the radiation-leaking nuclear plant in northern Japan will blow inland from the northeast and later from the east on Tuesday, the Japan Meteorological Agency said, according to Reuters. Harmful radiation can spread via wind and rain.

At a shelter in Sendai, workers told CBS News that everyone must avoid Tuesday’s rain, as it carries nuclear radiation. Low-level radioactive wind from the nuclear reactor in Fukushima could reach Tokyo within 10 hours, based on current winds, the French embassy says. Radiation at up to 9 times the normal level was briefly detected in Kanagawa near Tokyo.” (“Japan nuke plant fire leads to spewing radiation”, CBS News)

The magnitude of the crisis is hard to grasp. Another two reactors saw their cooling systems breakdown late Monday increasing the probability of a meltdown. So far, there have been 4 explosions and 3 fires at various reactors following the devastating 8.9 earthquake and tsunami.

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Hidehiko Nishiyama, an official with the Economy Ministry, issued this warning to people living in the vicinity of Fukushima:

“Now we are talking about levels that can damage human health….Please do not go outside. Please stay indoors. Please close windows and make your homes airtight. Don’t turn on ventilators. Please hang your laundry indoors.”

The radiation level in the capital, Tokyo, was recorded at 10 times normal on Tuesday evening, but the city government said there was no threat to human health. The prevailing winds have since shifted sending the radioactive material out to the Pacific Ocean.

An article in the New York Times suggests that a nuclear meltdown may be less dangerous that the spent fuel rods which are no longer submerged in water. Here’s an excerpt from the article:

“The pools, which sit on the top level of the reactor buildings and keep spent fuel submerged in water, have lost their cooling systems and the Japanese have been unable to take emergency steps because of the multiplying crises.

The threat is that the hot fuel will boil away the cooling water and catch fire, spreading radioactive materials far and wide in dangerous clouds….

The bad news is that if efforts to deal with the emergency fail, the results could be worse.

The pools are a worry at the stricken reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant because at least two of the three have lost their roofs in explosions, exposing the spent fuel pools to the atmosphere. By contrast, reactors have strong containment vessels that stand a better chance of bottling up radiation from a meltdown of the fuel in the reactor core.

Were the spent fuel rods in the pools to catch fire, nuclear experts say, the high heat would loft the radiation in clouds that would spread the radioactivity.

“It’s worse than a meltdown,” said David A. Lochbaum, a nuclear engineer at the Union of Concerned Scientists who worked as an instructor on the kinds of General Electric reactors used in Japan.” (“In Stricken Fuel-Cooling Pools, a Danger for the Longer Term”, New York Times)

Finally, here’s a statement delivered via You Tube on Tuesday by Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists:

“The situation is Japan is dire. It’s grave, and it doesn’t suit anyone’s purposes to downplay it. They are engaged in desperate measures to try to prevent the cores of three reactors from completely melting down and large radiological releases that could have a major health and environmental impact on Japan. If there is a large-scale radiological release, then within tens of kilometers, people would be at risk of acute radiation exposure, that is, exposures that are so high you would see immediate and potentially life-threatening effects. Beyond 30 to 40 kilometers downwind, that threat would be lessened, but the risk of radiation exposure would still increase the risk of getting cancer significantly….There will

need to be additional safeguards if we plan to have safe nuclear power in this country."

Watch the related video on GRTV: http://tv.globalresearch.ca/2011/03/nuclear-expert-situation-japan-dire

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