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Japan nuclear plant crisis: Fourth reactor on fire as blasts spark fear of serious radiation release

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A one-year-old boy is re-checked for radiation exposure after being decontaminated in Nihonmatsu, Fukushima, northern Japan on Monday.

A third reactor exploded late Monday at the Japanese nuclear plant crippled by Friday's earthquake, releasing a dangerous amount of radiation, officials said.

A fourth reactor was on fire and there were fears that the steel containment vessel protecting the plant's nuclear core had been breached - the worst-case scenario in such situations.

Japanese nuclear safety official [Hidehiko Nishiyama](#) said on Tuesday that water inside the damaged reactor might be boiling.

"We cannot deny the possibility of water boiling," Nishiyama told the media.

If the water boils, the nuclear fuel rods could be exposed and leak radiation.

PHOTOS: TRAGEDY IN JAPAN

As the threat of a nuclear catastrophe loomed, [Japan's](#) Prime Minister urged his nation to remain calm.

"There is a very high risk of further radioactive leaks," [Prime Minister Naoto Kan](#) said in an address to the nation. "I ask you to stay calm."

More than 180,000 people living in a 12-mile radius of the [Fukushima](#) Daiichi plant 150 miles north of [Tokyo](#) had already been evacuated over the weekend.

Kan asked that people living between a 12- and 18-mile radius hunker down inside. "Remain indoors, at home or in your offices," he said. "Avoid going outside."

Officials evacuated staff plant after reactor No. 2 exploded - the third blast there since Saturday.

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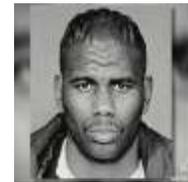
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A heroic team of 50 workers stayed behind to continue trying to cool the reactors with seawater and avert large-scale meltdown.

"They are putting themselves in a very dangerous situation," Kan said.

Tokyo Electric said a reading of 8,217 microsieverts per hour of radiation was taken at the plant's gates after the explosion - a fourfold increase from 40 minutes earlier.

The average background radiation a person absorbs all year is 3,100 microsieverts, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The government warned reporters not to "physically approach" the damaged plant.

Japan asked the United States for help after reactor No. 3 blew earlier in the day, injuring 11 workers. The blast was so large it could be felt 25 miles away.

Reactor No. 1 exploded Saturday.

The explosions were caused by a buildup of hydrogen as the fuel rods overheated.

Experts had said the thick steel container protecting the reactor's radioactive core was holding fast, but Tokyo Electric said the third blast may have caused a leak.

The U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet, stationed more than 100 miles away to help earthquake victims, sailed farther away from the stricken plant after detecting unusual levels of radioactivity in the air.

Seventeen chopper crewmen who flew through a radioactive plume 60 miles from the plant were contaminated and had to be scrubbed down.

At the White House, Nuclear Regulatory Commission head Gregory Jaczko assured Americans that there was "a very low likelihood" of harmful levels of radiation reaching Hawaii or the West Coast even in case of a meltdown because of the distance from Japan.

He said the NRC sent two nuclear experts to Tokyo to help deal with the damaged reactors.

AccuWeather published a chart saying it would take 11 days for radioactive particles to reach Los Angeles if they crossed the Pacific from Japan at 20 mph.

Fukushima's three reactors were damaged by the monster quake, and then the plant's cooling systems and backup generators were wiped out by the tsunami.

President Obama said the U.S. is prepared to offer all necessary aid. "We will stand with Japan in the difficult days ahead," he said.

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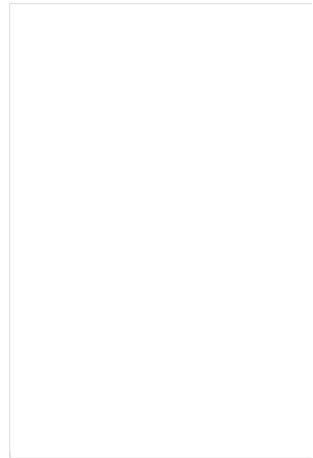
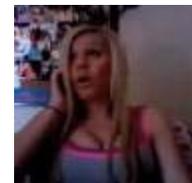


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2:20:55 AM @nyblues this article is about Japan, not Obama. Leave him alone,
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5:49:44 AM Here you can see a map of Japan radiation.
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7:41:56 AM wow. that looks like a scene right out of "I Am Legend."
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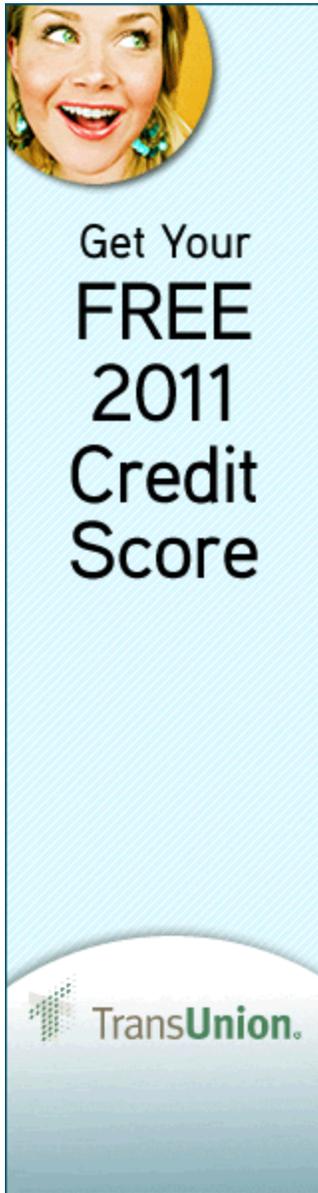
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