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Russia says Japan may face meltdown at six reactors

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NOVO-OGARYOVO, Russia, March 15 (Reuters) - Russia's nuclear chief warned on Tuesday that all six reactors at a stricken Japanese nuclear plant could melt down unless the authorities scrambled to cool down the nuclear fuel rods. [ID:LDE72E0A0]

Japan is grappling with a nuclear disaster after the quake-crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant exploded in the worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Soviet Ukraine.

Sergei Kiriyyenko, who holds sway over most of the former Soviet Union's nuclear facilities, told Russia's paramount leader, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, that under the worst case scenario all six reactors could melt down.

"All six can pose a threat unfortunately," Rosatom chief Kiriyyenko told Putin at a hastily convened meeting at Putin's Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow.

"But even if there is a meltdown at all six then this will still not lead to a nuclear explosion," he said.

Kiriyyenko added that gas escaping from the damaged reactors was spewing out radiation and that another risk is that the water being used for cooling the reactors could contaminate the water table.

Kiriyyenko said the information Russia was receiving from Tokyo was often patchy and out of date but that a group of Russian nuclear experts had been working on models trying to predict the worst case scenario in the disaster.

Kiriyyenko said a failure by the Japanese authorities to pour water into the fuel pool of reactor No. 4 had allowed it to overheat sparking a fire.

"Nearby are reactors No. 5 and No. 6 where... the temperature is rising... so most likely in the fuel pool," he said.

Kiriyyenko said there was very little chance of an explosion with the force that could propel radioactive dust up high enough into the atmosphere to pose a significant risk to Russia, even if there were strong winds towards Russian territory. (Reporting by Darya Korsunskaya, writing by Alexei Anishchuk)

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