

JAPAN: NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

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The Disaster

A serious nuclear accident occurred at a uranium-processing plant in Ibaraki Prefecture, 125 kilometres north east of Tokyo at 10:35 local time on 30 September. The Chief Cabinet Secretary of the government said this morning that it was very likely that there had been “an incident of a critical nature”. Critical applies to the point at which a nuclear chain reaction becomes self-sustaining.

The accident seems to have been caused by human error at the plant, when workers poured too much uranium solution into a tank, hitting critical mass and pushing radiation levels up 20,000 times higher than normal in Tokai, Ibaraki Prefecture.

Details of the accident are not yet known because the accident site is still off-limits. It is considered one of the worst nuclear accidents in Japan as nearly 40 plant workers, seven residents and three rescue team members were exposed to high levels of radiation. The accident left three workers hospitalised in serious condition at the Science and Technology Agency’s Radiation Medical Hospital.

Immediately following the incident, authorities in Ibaraki Prefecture sealed off a 200 metre radius around the accident site, and advised the 107,000 families (310,000 people) living within a 10 kilometre radius to stay indoors to avoid the risk of radiation exposure until inspections by the officials from the Prefecture and the Science and Technology Agency confirmed that radiation had decreased to a safe level. Some 80 persons or 39 families have been evacuated from the area.

The Japanese government now says that the danger has subsided and the 300,000 residents of the area have been allowed to leave their homes again.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Immediately after the disaster, the Japanese Red Cross Society (JRCS) was in contact with the prefectural authority to gather information. As requested by the Prefectural Governor, the JRCS set up a first aid post in the auditorium of Mito Red Cross Hospital for health check-ups and screenings, in co-operation with the Ibaraki Prefectural Central Hospital. The post became operational from 09:00 local time on 1 October.

A total of 1,053 residents had undergone medical check-ups up by noon and all results turned out to be negative. There are still 400 people waiting to undergo examination. The Mito Red Cross Hospital and the Sashima Red Cross Hospital also established further first aid posts in the Community Centres located in Kadobe and Yokobori. Each first aid post is staffed by one doctor, two nurses, and two administrators.

Needs

No external assistance is required by the Japanese Red Cross at this time although the International Federation will continue to monitor the situation closely through its Regional Delegation in Kuala Lumpur.

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