

Japan, a Year After the Disaster



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A man prays beside lanterns placed at the waterfront in Tokyo Bay to mark the first anniversary of the earthquake, the fourth most powerful ever recorded, and tsunami

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

This Sunday is the first anniversary of the major earthquake and tsunami in Japan. It led to one of the worst nuclear accidents ever.

The quake struck near the east coast of Honshu, Japan's main island. It was one of the most powerful ever recorded -- a magnitude nine. A wall of water struck the land.

Twenty thousand people died, mostly from the tsunami. More than two hundred fifty thousand buildings were destroyed. Nearly four hundred thousand people were left homeless.

Some rebuilding has begun. But many people are still in temporary housing.

Three reactors at the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power station suffered meltdowns. During the crisis, some government officials even considered urging people to leave Tokyo. VOA's Steve Herman reported on the disaster.

STEVE HERMAN: "I was among those near the atomic power facility on the fifteenth of March when, unknown to the public, an estimated ten million becquerels per hour of radioactive substances spewed from the three crippled reactors. For days, I and millions of people in Japan absorbed significantly higher doses of radiation than we normally would have been exposed to."

Radioactive material spread over an area that includes some of Japan's most valuable farmland. Officials say eighty-one thousand hectares of farmland are too heavily irradiated to let farmers plant rice. Vegetable, fruit and dairy farms also are affected.

Japan's government has been seeking advice from foreign scientists about how to reduce the radiation levels. Some of the scientists are from the former Soviet Union, site of the nineteen eighty-six Chernobyl nuclear accident.

No one has died from radiation as a result of the accident in Japan. Some scientists and government officials say radiation levels even close to the disabled power plant are safe. But since the disaster, officials have faced growing distrust among the Japanese public.

Japan also finds itself facing huge costs for cleaning up after the nuclear disaster and for paying damages to victims. Before the accident, nuclear power produced thirty percent of Japan's energy needs. Now some people think the accident will be the end of the nuclear power industry in the world's third largest economy.

Thorne Lay is a seismologist with the University of California, Santa Cruz. He says engineers had underestimated the chances that a great wave could drown the emergency power systems at the Japanese plant.

THORNE LAY: "Those are mostly design weaknesses that a good engineering think-through might say, let's put the backup power at very high elevations so that it could not possibly get drowned out."

Mr. Lay says scientists are better able to predict earthquake risks in some areas than they were in the past. Still, he says, they cannot provide decision makers with all the answers.

THORNE LAY: "We will try to our best to give early warning if that's possible and set up emergency response systems, but ultimately individuals have to prepare themselves."

In the United States, a nuclear plant is being built in Georgia. This is the country's first new one since the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in Pennsylvania in nineteen seventy-nine.

Safety is not the only concern. The cost of building a nuclear plant and producing electricity from it is much higher than other sources of power.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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