

Nuclear Crisis Escalates in Japan

✖ Japan may be heading toward the largest nuclear disaster in human history.

Naoto Kan, Japan's prime minister, said the crisis at the Fukushima plant is "very grave" and that the military, police and firefighters are "putting their lives on the line" to contain the crisis.

The island nation on Friday raised the severity rating of the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima plant from a level four to a level five. The international nuclear event scale ranges from one to seven.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) developed the scale to communicate the safety significance of reported nuclear and radiological incidents and accidents. A level four rating marks an accident with local consequences, while a level five event marks an accident with wider consequences. Level six is a serious accident and level seven is a major accident.

U.S. military forces in the Pacific are standing by to help Japan avert a greater disaster. Voice of America News reports that Admiral Robert Willard told reporters at the Pentagon that all possible measures must be taken to avoid a greater crisis.

"That would be a situation where the recovery effort to keep the cores covered in these reactors would ever be abandoned," Willard said. "And we believe that that can't happen, that we must do everything required to keep water and cooling affecting these reactors."

Japan continues to work to cool the damaged reactors and

exposed fuel rods that the 9-magnitude earthquake rocked a week ago. If the reactors are not cooled, they could release radiation beyond the immediate area. Hong Kong has been actively testing for radiation seeping into China, and so far is not reporting any incidents.

To put the danger into context, only the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine rated seven on the international nuclear event scale. A 30 kilometer exclusion zone was established to protect citizens from radiation. A level six nuclear disaster was seen at Kyshtym in the Soviet Union in 1958. Level five disasters include the Three Mile Island accident near Harrisburg, PA. That's where Japan stands now.

"We, when necessary, will conduct operations inside that radius, when they're in support of the Japanese Defense Forces," Willard said. "So while U.S. citizens are constrained from operating in there, my forces are not, when they're needed to conduct humanitarian assistance, disaster response or logistics support to our Japanese friends or to our own forces or any other forces that we happen to be supporting."