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Japan's Reactors Still 'Not Stable,' U.S. Regulator Says

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON — The condition of the damaged Fukushima Daiichi reactors in Japan is "static," but with improvised cooling efforts they are "not stable," the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission told a Senate committee on Tuesday.

"We don't see significant changes from day to day," the chairman, Gregory B. Jaczko, said, while adding that the risk of big additional releases gets smaller as each day passes.

Long-term regular cooling of the reactors has not been re-established, nor has a regular way of delivering water to the spent-fuel pools, he told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. And when an aftershock hit the site and cut some offshore power supplies, he said, some pumps failed and cooling stopped for 50 minutes.

The situation is "not stable" and will remain so until "that kind of situation would be handled in a predictable manner," he said.

Mr. Jaczko also offered a new theory about the cause of the explosions that destroyed the secondary containment structures of several of the reactors. The prevailing theory has been that hydrogen gas was created when the reactor cores overheated and filled with steam instead of water; the steam reacts with the metal, which turns into a powder and then gives off hydrogen.

The Tokyo Electric Power Company, which operates the nuclear plant, intended to vent the excess steam as well as the hydrogen outside of the plant, but experts have suggested that when operators tried this, the vents ruptured, allowing the hydrogen to enter the secondary containments.

But Mr. Jaczko said Tuesday that the explosions in the secondary containments might have been caused by hydrogen created in the spent-fuel pools within those containments.

If true, that would mean that the introduction of hardened vents at reactors at nuclear plants in the United States — cited as an improvement that would prevent such an explosion from happening — would not in fact make any difference.

That theory also raises the possibility that it may be safer to move some of the spent fuel out of the pools in the containment structures and into dry storage, an idea that is attracting some support in Congress. Spent nuclear fuel must remain in water for the first five years or so to cool but can then can be stored in small steel-and-concrete silos with no moving parts.

The industry uses these "dry casks" only when its pools are full. And so far the regulatory commission has said that pool and cask storage are equally safe. Still, some industry executives would like to tap the Nuclear Waste Fund, federal money set aside for a permanent waste repository, to pay for cask storage, an idea that is also favored by some environmentalists.

Mr. Jaczko's statement on the possible source of the hydrogen is the third big reversal in commission statements on the nuclear crisis at Fukushima.

Commission officials have also seemed less certain after stating that the spent-fuel pool in the No. 4 reactor was empty or close to empty, a situation that was evidently the basis for recommending a 50-mile evacuation for Americans in the plant's vicinity. Commission experts also said that radiation readings suggested that core material had slipped out of the vessel of the No. 2 reactor and entered a drywell in the primary containment, only to retreat again on whether that was in fact the case.

Mr. Jaczko also signaled that the regulatory commission itself was shifting from an extreme alert mode to a more sustainable long-term effort to monitor Japan's crisis. Staffing in the commission's round-the-clock emergency center at its headquarters in Rockville, Md., has been reduced, he said, with many staff members returning to their regular duties but available for consultation when events warrant.

He drew praise from the committee's chairwoman, Senator Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat, but criticism as well. She is seeking an especially high level of scrutiny for two twin-reactor plants in her state, the only ones that the commission says are in zones of high seismic activity. Mr. Jaczko said that all reactors were being evaluated.

She countered by saying that those two plants, Diablo Canyon and San Onofre, were at the highest risk. Mr. Jaczko said they were not, explaining that they were designed with the earthquake risk in mind and that risks to American plants generally were small.

Ms. Boxer replied that the Japanese had said the same thing, at least until the March 11 accident. "It's eerie to me," she said. "I don't sense enough humility from all of us here."

Another witness, Charles G. Pardee, the chief operating officer of Exelon Generation, the largest nuclear operator in the United States, also testified that the nation's nuclear plants were designed for the worst natural disaster observed in their areas, plus a substantial margin.

Thomas B. Cochran, a physicist at the Natural Resources Defense Council, gave some credit to American operators. Worldwide, he said, reactors are "not sufficiently safe," but "the next nuclear power plant disaster is more likely to occur abroad than in the U.S."

But the industry will have to rethink its practices nonetheless, he said. "If the nuclear power industry is to have a long-term future, attention must be paid to existing operating reactors," Mr. Cochran said. He ticked off a long list of factors, including American reactors that share Fukushima's basic design, that would be grounds for phasing them out.