

Worker exposed to radiation at Japan nuclear plant -- No health problem, leakage outside

Notice the last paragraph characterization of Japan's worst nuclear accident.

The Associated Press
June 25, 2006

A worker has been exposed to small amount of radiation at a nuclear waste processing plant in northern Japan, but no immediate health problems were found, and no radiation leaked outside the plant, officials said Saturday.

The 19-year-old male worker took in a small amount of radioactive material at a spent fuel recycling plant in Rokkasho Village in northern Aomori prefecture (state), operated by Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., while inspecting solid fuel _ a mixture of uranium and plutonium, said company spokesman Shigehiro Ito.

A preliminary test found a small amount of radiation inside his nose but no radioactivity was found in his lungs or other parts of his body, although results of more detailed test are expected to take upto10 days, Ito said.

The incident was the second in just over several weeks. In late May, a 36-year-old male worker also was exposed to radiation at the plant.

The Rokkasho reprocessing plant started test operations on March 31 after a delay caused by a leak of radioactive water in 2002 and strident public opposition. The plant eventually is to produce MOX fuel, a uranium-plutonium mixture.

The fuel is a central element of Japan's plans to reduce its dependence on energy imports by building so-called fast-breeder reactors, which produce plutonium that can then be reused as fuel.

Japan, which now relies on nuclear plants for a third of its energy needs, aims to raise that to nearly 40 percent by 2010.

But the Japanese public has grown increasingly wary of the nuclear power industry following a spate of safety problems, shutdowns and cover-ups.

In a separate incident, a small amount of steam was found to have leaked from a nuclear power plant in central Japan on Saturday, but no radiation was released into the environment, the plant's operator said. A worker found the steam leak near a valve on pressurized water supply equipment during a routine daily inspection at the No. 2 unit at Mihama Nuclear Power Plant, the operator, Kansai Electric Power Co., said in a statement. The reactor, about 320 kilometers (200 miles) west of Tokyo, had resumed operation on Thursday, after being shut down for several weeks for a regular inspection. Plant workers have reduced the reactor's output to curb the steam leak, inspect the equipment and repair defects, the company said.

The plant is making final preparations to resume operating another reactor that has been shut down since it was involved in Japan's **worst-ever nuclear plant accident**, in August 2004. In that case, a corroded pipe ruptured and sprayed plant workers with boiling water and steam, killing five of them and injuring six, though no radiation was released in the accident.