

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: McHale, Judith A <McHaleJA@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, March 18, 2011 9:17 AM
To: H
Subject: Japan

You probably know all this but I found it interesting and helpful.

Yesterday I called a close friend of mine who lives in Brussels. His name is [redacted] and he is one Europe's leading experts on nuclear energy and headed up that area at the European Commission for a number of years. Indeed [redacted] was one of the lead team members who coordinated the Chernobyl effort for the EC (he was on the ground there) and also had responsibility for verification of the decommissioning of the Russian nuclear submarine fleet. Both very tricky and highly radioactive tasks.

I called him because I was increasingly frustrated by the "hyperventilating" that was going on in the media and frankly, I began to be concerned that, while I thought they were overreacting, maybe I was under-reacting.

I asked him to explain what was happening and what was the absolute worst case scenario. His explanation was most helpful and reassuring on all fronts. He has been watching events in Japan very closely and I believe has spoken with colleagues around the world. Bottom line is that while this is no doubt a serious event it will have minimal impact even if there is an entire meltdown of all core materials. He said that in the worst case all containment structures would collapse or otherwise be destroyed. The nuclear materials contained within those structures would ignite and there would be an explosion and nuclear particles would be dispersed into the atmosphere. Anyone within a 10 to 12 mile radius of the explosion would be in danger if at the time of the explosion they inhaled air containing that material. The material itself would be rapidly dispersed significantly limiting its impact to a small area, and not, for example endangering Tokyo. The site would be contaminated and the core materials would take a number of years to cool down but the affected area would be very small and indeed could be "cleaned". Since these reactors were 40 years old and scheduled to be taken off line he expects that the long-term impact to Japan's energy supply to be minimal. Key here is for those operating within 10 to 12 miles of plant to take all precautions against inhaling the contaminated air by wearing protective clothing. The Russians did not do that but [redacted] said it is clear that the Japanese workers are well aware of this issue. Those closest to the site are indeed in physical danger and could be killed during an explosion which would be horrible but not the massive disruption people fear.

He also said the next 24 hours would be critical. He told me if I woke up today and there had been no more major events it would mean they were probably on their way to containing the event. Based on the reports I've seen so far that seems to be the case. Finally he said that the greater challenge for Japan is dealing with the economic aftermath of the tsunami and earthquake.

Obviously nobody knows for sure what is going to happen but I thought [redacted] perspective was interesting particularly in light of his Russian experience.

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