



Fourteen months after the accident, a pool brimming with used fuel rods and filled with vast quantities of radioactive cesium still sits on the top floor of a heavily damaged reactor building, covered only with plastic.

The public's fears about the pool have grown in recent months as some scientists have warned that it has the most potential for setting off a new catastrophe, now that the three nuclear reactors that suffered meltdowns are in a more stable state, and as frequent quakes continue to rattle the region.

The worries picked up new traction in recent days after the operator of the plant, Tokyo Electric Power Company, or Tepco, said it had found a slight bulge in one of the walls of the reactor building, stoking fears over the building's safety.

To try to quell such worries, the government sent the environment and nuclear minister to the plant on Saturday, where he climbed a makeshift staircase in protective garb to look at the structure supporting the pool, which he said appeared sound. The minister, Goshi Hosono, added that although the government accepted Tepco's assurances that reinforcement work had shored up the building, it had ordered the company to conduct further studies because of the bulge.

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