

## Sounding worse, when things are really getting better

Let's get some crucial perspective on alarmist reports of radiation levels



BILL DURODIE

Over the weekend, many media worldwide reported a radiation spike emanating from the stricken nuclear power plant at Fukushima in Japan of the order of 10 million times above the norm. It transpired that this figure was erroneous and it has since been retracted by the authorities there. But why did so many seem so keen to report the alarming estimate?

The closer the situation comes to being resolved at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan, the clearer it will become what actually happened there. Hence it will sound like matters are getting worse just as they are getting better.

As things stand, it would seem that one of the worst earthquakes ever recorded, followed by a devastating tsunami that took out the back-up generators required to cool the facility, may have caused a minor fissure to the casing of one of six reactors, leading to some radioactive materials being re-

leased to the environment.

It is important to maintain a sense of proportion and perspective about this. The quantities released, while alarmingly headlined as raising radiation levels in nearby seawater to 1,250 times the normal safety limit, still amounts to less than 1 per cent that which was released over the course of the worst nuclear accident in history that occurred at Chernobyl, in the former Soviet Union in 1986.

### CHERNOBYL MYTHS

There are two things worth noting from the outset. Firstly, that 1,250 times amounts to not very much at all. And secondly, contrary to the popular myths about Chernobyl, it is today a visitor destination, albeit for what the trade identifies as extreme tourism.

The three remaining reactors at Chernobyl reopened just seven months after the explosion and worked through to the end of their expected lifespans in 2000; since then a small army of workers has been on-site, steadily decommissioning the plant.

Alarmist figures as to the number of people affected by that disaster bear no resem-



A man evacuated from an area near the Fukushima nuclear plant undergoing a test for signs of radiation at a health centre in northern Japan. REUTERS

blance to the actual data confirmed by the Chernobyl Forum – a group that includes the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization (WHO) – in their 2006 report. Only 50 deaths can be directly attributed to the accident, among those workers brave enough to return to the plant when it was burning to sort out the mess.

Those who suggest thousands, and maybe even tens of thousands, of cancers are linked to the Chernobyl disaster do so by using a linear extrapolation from what we know extremely high doses of radiation can do, given our insights into the terrible aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Most researchers recognise this is a hypothetical figure for which there is little evidence – it is as unlikely that we can extrapolate down from those incidents as it is to say that, because a temperature of 200°C would kill 100 per cent of human beings, so a temperature of 20°C should kill 10 per cent of them.

Our bodies are able to tolerate radiation up to a threshold. This brings us back to the contaminated seawater, as well as the food items and drinking water in Japan today. The situation is certainly not ideal, and no doubt lessons will be learnt as they always are after every emergency.

But as some have indicated, even the worst levels of radiation reported from Japan (aside from those to which a handful of workers have been exposed to) amounts to

little compared to natural background levels in other places on Earth, as well as comparing favourably with other exposures we voluntarily engage ourselves with, whether these be through flying or having an X-ray or a CT scan.

### ARMY OF DOOM-MONGERS

The anti-nuclear campaigners, however – alongside the army of catastrophists, who seem keen to imagine the worst at every opportunity – are now smugly standing by to say “I told you so”. The fact is, none of them suggested there would be a tiny crack through which a limited amount of radiation may leak. Rather, there was a cacophony of voices prophesying a meltdown and Armageddon.

As none of these commentators were nuclear engineers who attended the site in Japan itself, it is obvious that all they could do was imagine the worst and project that fantasy into the public domain. It would have been preferable to have a few more trained specialists dealing with the actual emergency.

From a sociological perspective, however, it was entirely possible to predict that there would be a clamour of doom-mongers and assorted lobbyists keen to claim this incident for themselves and attach it to whatever cause or confusion they hold.

Eight years ago, as hostilities resumed in Iraq, there were many determined to uncover Saddam Hussein's supposed stash of weapons of mass destruction, despite

the evidence consistently pointing to their absence. We were advised to focus on the unknown, or the “unknown unknowns” as the United States Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously put it.

Two years ago, once the director-general of the WHO had identified H1N1 as “a threat to the whole of humanity”, nations everywhere cranked into pandemic prevention overdrive, convinced that only their precautionary actions could save humanity – again, despite all evidence pointing to the outbreak of a mild version of influenza.

We have to recognise that once a particular mindset is established, it is very hard for people to accept that their model of the world may not be correct – despite all the facts staring them in the face.

So too with the nuclear incident in Japan. Some newscasters seem determined to convey the worst that could happen, as if this were some public service. But surely at such times the role of the media is to report the facts rather than imagine a Hollywood script?

The problem we now confront is that a significant number of cultural pessimists have staked their reputations on proving that there was a major problem and possibly that this was covered up. Such individuals seem to desire – if not need – the worst, to confirm their apocalyptic frameworks.

It is high time we focused on the evidence and let those who are actually capable of dealing with the mess at Fukushima get on with their jobs without having to worry that their every step will be projected onto the world stage as an example of incompetence and conspiracy.

And once the situation is resolved, we will need to ask why it is that we live in such a pessimistic culture that projects the worst at every opportunity, and acts as if it were true in a manner that even impacts on those who should know better. ■

*Dr Bill Durodie is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*

## U.S. DOLLAR IS A BIG DEAL.

So are these travel deals to America with ZUJI, where Big Deals Happen.

San Francisco	China Airlines	fr \$1478
Vancouver	Air Canada	fr \$1598
Los Angeles	EVA Airways	fr \$1674
New York	Cathay Pacific	fr \$1766
Toronto	EVA Airways	fr \$2144

ALL-INCLUSIVE PRICING  
No credit card fees

zuji.com.sg