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# How bad is it? Depends on which nuclear expert you ask

March 15, 2011 | By the CNN Wire Staff

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Experts disagreed Tuesday over just how bad things have gotten at the stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in northeastern Japan, but all of them agreed that things could get worse.

An explosion Tuesday at the plant elevated the situation there to a "serious accident," on a level just below Chernobyl, a French nuclear official said, referring to the international scale that rates the severity of such incidents and to an incident 25 years ago in what is now Ukraine. His comments came before a fire was reported Wednesday in the No. 4 reactor building at the Japanese plant.

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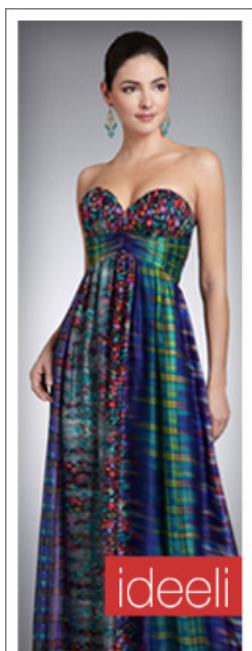
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The International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale -- or INES -- ranks incidents from Level 1, which indicates very little danger to the general population, to Level 7, a "major accident" with a large release of radioactive material and widespread health and environmental effects.

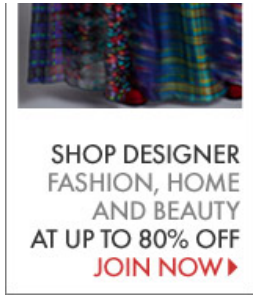
"It's clear we are at Level 6, that's to say we're at a level in between what happened at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl," Andre-Claude Lacoste, president of France's nuclear safety authority, told reporters Tuesday.

The core meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania, in 1979 caused no injuries or deaths, and only low levels of radiation were found later in plants and animals, experts said.

At least 30 people died following the 1986 explosion and fire at Chernobyl, and large swaths of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were contaminated from the nuclear fallout. Thousands of cases of childhood thyroid cancer resulted, according to Dr. Ira Helfand of Physicians for Social Responsibility, which opposes the use of nuclear power.

Japanese nuclear authorities initially rated the incident that began last Friday with a 9.0-magnitude earthquake in northeastern Japan followed by a tsunami at Level 4, according to Greg Webb of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Level 4 is characterized as a minor release of radioactive material that necessitates only measures to control food due to contamination. But in the latest information about the explosion, Japanese authorities did not give it a rating, Webb said, and the IAEA did not cite one either.

But Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund and author of "Deadly Arsenals: Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Threats," said the level is far beyond 4. "We are way beyond Three Mile Island level and heading into Chernobyl territory," he told CNN in a telephone interview. "This is at



least a 5, probably a 6 and it could end up a 7."

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