

Scott Pelley and a "60 Minutes" team have been in Japan for over a week, travelling from Tokyo to the port city Sendai to the once-beautiful resort of Matsushima and into the zone surrounding the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power plant. There, emergency crews are currently struggling to restore cooling and stabilize pressure inside the reactors.

"What we have found in Japan is a catastrophe that reveals both the power of nature and the fragility of human technology.

The Fukushima Daiichi crisis is not "one" nuclear emergency - it is four potentially catastrophic events standing side-by-side. In all, there are six reactor stations. Numbers one through four are in peril. Last week, crews risked their lives to get water onto melting uranium fuel. Through explosions and blasts of radioactive steam, a few hundred Japanese joined battle with the most powerful force known to man.

One of the Americans responding to the emergency is Julia Neshewat. She's a State Department official who was already in Japan working on nuclear issues. She served in Washington as deputy chief of staff to the director of national intelligence. In Tokyo, she's been on the Fukushima disaster from the start.

"We're providing the full resources of the United States government, everything we've got?" Pelley asked.

"Yes. Absolutely," Neshewat said.

"Our best people are on this?" Pelley asked.

"Yes they are," she said. "Working non-stop around the clock in each of the operations centers."

Neshewat told Pelley the U.S. is working side by side with the Japanese, but that this was not the case in the beginning. An American team of top experts arrived shortly after the disaster but they were largely stuck at the U.S. Embassy. The Japanese didn't think they needed the help. But by last Tuesday the emergency was out of control and the U.S. gave the Japanese an ominous private warning.

"That if we don't expand the efforts, we'll require heroic work that could be quite devastating for the workers," Neshewat explained.

Asked what the U.S. meant by that, she told Pelley, "That means they could very well lose their lives."

"An official with the U.S. government told the Japanese that your people are going to have to die to save that plant, unless you let us help you?" Pelley asked.

"Yes," Neshewat replied.

At one point during the week, the hazard was so great the Japanese took all but about 70 workers out of the plant.

Their problem is water: the systems that keep the radioactive fuel rods cool failed. The rods are partially melting, releasing radiation. And it's not just the reactors - there are also used fuel rods, essentially nuclear waste, stored in pools nearby. They're also losing water.

American experts fear one of these pools is already dry. Neshewat told "60 Minutes" the danger is multiplied because the reactors are so close to each other.

"That is a grave concern at this time. If there is an explosion, if there is a meltdown, a fire, it can absolutely affect the neighboring plants," she told Pelley.

Asked what that would mean, she said, "Goodness, I don't even want to think what that could mean. That's just something that we would have to really plan for it at the greatest scale. And we're hoping and praying that that's not the case."

All last week, the U.S. said the crisis was more grave than the Japanese apparently believed. And so far, the U.S. experts have been right. Last Wednesday, the American Embassy began a voluntary evacuation of U.S. citizens.

It wasn't until two days later that the Japanese acknowledged the threat was greater than they'd thought. The Japanese declared a voluntary evacuation zone of 12 miles around the plant; the U.S. says it should be 50 miles. There is great uncertainty.

Top experts disagree on fundamental questions such as whether melting fuel rods would cause an explosion or just a fire. Answers are critical to planning for a bigger emergency.

"It's just so uncertain. This is unprecedented, you know, uncharted territory that the consequences could be greater than we expect," Neshewat said.

Comment [v1]: Authoritative?

More than 50 American experts are in Japan, including engineers from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and public health advisors. Many are working in three joint emergency operations centers around Tokyo. One of their biggest problems is getting a good look at the damaged reactors. Surveillance pictures have been poor.

"You're dealing with the smoke, you're dealing with the debris. It is just very difficult to make such an assessment of the situation. I mean you're really trying to scrutinize the pixels of the picture," Nesheiwat explained.

The U.S. team is using cameras and sensors carried by drones in the air and robots on the ground to get a clearer idea of what's going on. No one knows what will happen at Fukushima, but it's important to remember that even without this nuclear crisis Japan has already suffered a catastrophe.

The moment that altered the course of Japanese history was when the tsunami inundated about 400 miles of the northern coast.

You can't picture the enormity of it, so "60 Minutes" stopped in one small town called Matsushima. It was said to be among the most beautiful places in Japan, a famous vacation spot. The name has the same ring to a Japanese as Big Sur or Cape Cod does to an American. Matsushima means "Pine Tree Island" - the trees are about all that's left.

Pelley met David Chumreolert, a native of Texas, who has been teaching English in Matsushima schools for a couple of years.

They met on a bridge over a canal where tourists came to fish. Now the canal is full of houses and cars.

Nobiru Elementary School is near that canal. **Chumreolert was among the teachers and students who were wrapping up the day when the building began to roll on the greatest quake Japan has ever seen.**

"The principal was like 'Oh this is a big one so everyone get under a desk.' And then it quieted down and the teachers were like 'Let's go check the classrooms to make sure everyone is okay and start getting everyone to the gym,'" Chumreolert remembered.

The reinforced gym stands across the playground from the three-story school.

"Some guy with a helmet on, he came in and he was like 'Tsunami's coming' and then the principal was like, 'Ok everyone run back to the school.' The fifth grade teachers, he was in front of the group and he was outside and he said he looked down this way and he saw a wall of water so he's like 'Everyone, run back inside,'" Chumreolert said.

But Chumreolert said it was too late to get out of the gym.

Inside, there were around 200 people, children from ages 6 to 11, parents who had come to pick them up. Less than 30 minutes after the quake, they were swept up in a surge of seawater and debris.

Chumreolert remembered the moment the water hit the building. "It was blasting through the door and when it was hitting the walls, it would make a kind of whirlpool motion like clockwise, or counterclockwise, rotating around the gym. At that point it had risen up to the stage level and by then everyone was on the stage and we were just watching the water fill up," he said.

But he said the water didn't stop there.

Asked what happened next, Chumreolert said "I realized it's probably gonna get higher, I don't now, so I grabbed the side of the stage, the wall, 'cause I didn't wanna get, it was starting to get sucked out into the middle. And I didn't want that to happen. So I grabbed the wall and I could kinda feel my body, you know, going sideways. And then, like, a grandpa and some lady who was hanging on to him, they washed by me and they managed to grab my shoulder and so they were hanging on to me and I could feel it getting pulled."

Chumreolert told Pelley he didn't know what happened to the older man and woman that were holding onto him.

"What happened then?" Pelley asked.

"I grabbed the railing and I somehow I found my footing. I think it was the top of the basketball goal," Chumreolert said.

The water, Chumreolert said, came all the way up to the second floor balcony. There's narrow standing room between the railing and the second floor wall.

"I saw one of my kids, he was struggling. But he came close. I grabbed him, I grabbed his shirt, and I was able to pull him over to the side, and he was able to grab onto the railing. And I helped heave him over," Chumreolert remembered. "And I saw a big desk with four or five of my kids hanging on to it and they were shouting 'Help me, help, help us, help us,' and

Comment [v2]: Key source tells one story as eyewitness.

I was able to grab a hold of the desk and pull it closer to me and then was able to grab them one by one and we were able to get them over and then there was one more lady and we got her over too."

In two hours, night had fallen.

Chumreolert and the others were in total darkness, with seawater all around them for hours, wondering when the rescuers would come. "And then the aftershocks would come and everyone would huddle down together and like afraid again," he remembered.

"What were you saying to the children over that long dark night?" Pelley asked.

"I just kept saying 'Hang in there, hang in there' and just tried to give them a little smile, make them smile a little bit," he recalled.

In a wrecked house nearby we found a 6-year-old child, rescued from the gym, in her grandmother's arms. She told Pelley the water came up to her neck and face.

Asked how she got away, she told Pelley, "A teacher grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up out the water."

We don't know if it was David Chumreolert who grabbed her. There's a lot that's unknown.

"How many survivors would you estimate were up there on the balcony?" Pelley asked.

"I'm hoping at least over 100, I hope, hope. I'm not sure though," Chumreolert said.

We came back to the gym and were surprised to find those who did not survive lying across the basketball court and on the stage. Families searched for loved ones, lifting blankets one by one in a combination of hope and dread.

"There are about 85 bodies in the gym, by my count," Pelley said, standing inside the gym. "It's now five days since the tsunami. The army has come in and done the best they can. They pulled a car out of this entranceway and wrapped most of the bodies up in army blankets. But the fact of the matter is there is no place to put this many bodies. The morgues are completely full and, frankly, there aren't enough people to move them. It is a fact, in this part of Japan, that at this moment in time, that there are not enough living to take care of the dead."

In Matsushima we found one, small unit of Japanese Self Defense Force engineers. They seemed to vanish in the vast destruction. They're clearing roads and searching houses. But the response, so far, seems strangely small. They're spread thin over the 400 miles.

There's no sense of hurry - the engineers knock off at dusk, a sign they're not expecting to rescue anyone, not now.

All across northern Japan, nearly half a million are homeless, nearly a million have no power and two million are without water.

In the coastal city of Sendai, a city of a million people, about the size of Detroit, we saw nearly 3,000 residents patiently waiting for a grocery store to open for the first time in days.

There are shortages of food and lines for gasoline stretch half a mile.

Add to this what you might call nuclear refugees: thousands are in shelters because their homes are too close to the Fukushima reactors.

Tomonori Kato came in to be checked for radiation. His home is half a mile from the nuclear plant. He's lived there 50 years. He told us he expects he'll never return. The nuclear refugees were loaded on buses and hurried away, carrying almost nothing.

Not only are their homes in danger of being irradiated, but every possession they own.

Yoshihiko Igarashi's house is three miles from the plant. His daughter was born there. She turned 20 last week in the shelter.

Like everyone, they've laid out a few square feet on the floor with no idea how long they'll be there; 1,600 people are in their shelter alone.

It's just 20 miles from where the reactor fires are burning. If you believe U.S. experts, that's much too close. Igarashi told "60 Minutes" he feels that way too.

The Japanese are, for the moment, balancing between the disaster that has happened and the disaster that awaits. The prime minister told his people they will rebuild Japan.

But all along the northern coast, and in the town of Matsushima, there is a powerful sense that, for now, time has stopped."

Comment [v3]: How credible is she?

Comment [v4]: Transparency

Comment [v5]: Opening Freezer

Comment [v6]: Reporter opening freezer

Comment [v7]: Eyewitness

Comment [v8]: Eyewitness