

Mineral Zeolite Dropped in Sea to Mop up Radiation

JAPAN: Japanese scientists have begun experimenting with special chemical agent to reduce radiation in the seawater around the crippled Fukushima nuclear reactors.

The mineral zeolite absorbs caesium-137, one of the radioactive materials that have been leaking from the plant since the earthquake and tsunami on March 11.

Zeolite was released in sandbags dropped into the Pacific Ocean off the coast, where fishing has been banned because of contamination fears. Engineers also hope to use the mineral to purify thousands of tonnes of cooling water inside the plant.

Earlier, they were forced to dump more than 10,000 tonnes of lightly contaminated water into the sea. A giant underwater fence has since been set up to restrict the flow of toxic waste. Now the challenge is to make safe the water that has been circulating through the reactors to cool the nuclear fuel and prevent a meltdown.

The latest effort to control the crisis came as political fallout threatened to end the career of Prime Minister Naoto Kan. He has called the triple disaster the worst event to befall Japan since World War II.

However, commentators say he has failed to rise to the occasion, with a poor rhetorical performance and limited appearances. The opposition has called for a cross-party truce established after the disaster and is demanding he resign.

"Going on under the present leadership would be unfortunate for the Japanese people," said Sadakazu Tanigaki, leader of the centre-right Liberal Democratic party.

Kan's supporters say he is being undermined by bureaucracy and vested interests at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, owner of the plants. Yesterday the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper said the government secretly planned to take over the company and break it up.

Kan's opinion poll ratings have slumped and his party, the Democrats, lost two local election races this month.

There are some positive signs. The United States State Department said that even in the event of an unexpected disruption at the Fukushima plant, harmful exposures to people beyond the 80 km evacuation zone were unlikely.

Sunday Times,

The Dominion Post, Monday, April 18 2011 – page B2