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After Storm, Toxic Water Overflows in Japan

By **MARTIN FACKLER**

TOKYO — The operator of Japan's wrecked nuclear plant said Monday that rainwater from a weekend storm became contaminated as it collected behind barriers meant to stop radiation leaks. The toxic water overflowed those barriers at several locations, with some of it possibly spilling into the Pacific Ocean.

It was the latest in a litany of lapses and aggravations for the problem-plagued cleanup of the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, or Tepco, said water from heavy rain on Sunday had accumulated behind foot-high concrete walls that encircle clusters of storage tanks. Tepco built those barriers to contain spills from the storage tanks, a problem that has led to intense public criticism of the company.

However, on Sunday the barriers acted as dams to trap the rainwater into ponds. Water levels in 11 of those ponds rose high enough to spill over the barriers, Tepco said. It said some of the spilled water may have flowed down a drainage ditch into the Pacific outside the plant's artificial harbor.

After the rain, Tepco said, it tested water in the ponds that overflowed and found that a half-dozen were contaminated with levels of radioactive strontium-90 above the limit of 10 becquerels per liter set by regulators for releasing water into the sea. Radiation levels at the most contaminated site were 71 times that limit, Tepco said.

Releases of strontium are particularly worrisome because it can collect in human bones and possibly cause leukemia, experts say.

Tepco did not say where the strontium had originated, though the most likely candidate appeared to be radioactive particles scattered on the ground, possibly by the explosions that followed the triple meltdown in March 2011.

Another puzzle was why the rainfall Sunday, which the Japan Meteorological Agency measured at about four inches, was enough to overwhelm the foot-high barriers. On Monday, Tepco offered one possible explanation, saying the barriers had already trapped water during a typhoon that swept through eastern Japan last week.

Tepco has installed pumps designed to drain rainwater into tanks, where it is tested for radiation before it

is released into the sea. However, the pumps appeared unable to cope with the large amounts of rain dumped by the typhoon, so when the rain struck Sunday, water was still up to nine inches deep in some spots, Tepco said.