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SPECIAL ISSUE APRIL WEEK 3




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✉ info@theprayasindia.com
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Special Issue

April (Week 3)

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How Japan plans to release contaminated Fukushima water into the ocean?

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *Japan plans to release into the sea more than a million tonnes of radioactive water from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear station. Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings Inc (Tepco) will begin pumping out water in about two years after treatment in a process that will take decades to complete.*

Contaminated water

- Tepco has been struggling with the build-up of contaminated water since bringing three reactors under control after a 2011 earthquake and tsunami knocked out electricity and cooling. The company has been using a makeshift system of pumps and piping to inject water into damaged reactor vessels to keep melted uranium fuel rods cool.
- The water is contaminated as it comes in contact with the fuel before leaking into damaged basements and tunnels, where it mixes with groundwater that flows through the site from hills above. The combination results in excess contaminated water that is pumped out and treated before being stored in huge tanks crowding the site.
- Those tanks now hold about 1.3 million tonnes of radioactive water, enough for about 500 Olympic-sized swimming pools.
- Efforts to tackle the problem have included building an “ice wall” around the damaged reactors and wells to draw groundwater away before it reaches the reactors. These measures have slowed, but not halted, the buildup of contaminated water.
- Over the years, Tepco has also battled leaks, spills, malfunctioning equipment and safety breaches, hindering cleanup efforts expected to run for decades.
- In 2018, Tepco admitted it had not filtered all dangerous materials out of the water, despite saying for years they had been removed.

Water release

- Tepco plans to filter the contaminated water again to remove isotopes, leaving only tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen hard to separate from water. Tepco will then dilute the water until tritium levels fall below regulatory limits, before pumping it directly into the ocean from the coastal site.
- Water containing tritium is routinely released from nuclear plants around the world and releasing the Fukushima water to the ocean is supported by regulatory authorities.
- Tritium is considered to be relatively harmless because it does not emit enough energy to penetrate human skin. But when ingested it can raise cancer risks, a Scientific American article said in 2014.
- The first water release is not expected for about two years, time Tepco will use to begin filtering the water, building infrastructure and acquiring regulatory approval.
- Until then, the buildup of contaminated water will continue, with annual costs of water storage estimated at about 100 billion yen (\$912.66 million).
- Once begun, the water disposal will take decades to complete, with a rolling filtering and dilution process, alongside the planned decommissioning of the plant.

Reaction to ocean release

- Tepco is engaging with fishing communities and other stakeholders and is promoting agriculture, fishery and forest products in stores and restaurants to reduce any reputational harm to produce from the area.
- However, environmental groups, including Greenpeace, say the government should build more tanks to hold the water outside the plant instead of choosing the cheaper option of ocean release.
- Many people have questioned Tepco’s plans because there is a high level of distrust of the company.



- Fishing unions in Fukushima urged the government for years not to release the water, arguing it would undo work to restore the damaged reputation of their fisheries.
- Last October, the head of Japan's fisheries unions said releasing the water would have a "catastrophic impact" on the industry.
- Neighbouring countries have also expressed concern. On, a foreign ministry spokesman in South Korea, which maintains restrictions on Japanese produce, said it "expresses serious concerns that the decision could bring a direct and indirect impact on the safety of our people and surrounding environment."
- Municipal councils in Busan and Ulsan, South Korean cities close to the sea, have called for the release plan to be scrapped.
- In China, a foreign ministry spokesman in October urged Japan to act with a "high sense of responsibility towards its own people, neighbouring countries and the international community".

A timeline of the US war in Afghanistan

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: US President Joe Biden announced Wednesday that he will be withdrawing all remaining combat troops from Afghanistan by September 11, thus ending the longest-running war in American history. The removal of around 3,000 American troops coincides with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks, which sparked the initial US invasion of Afghanistan.

As the United States prepares to end its longest war, here is a timeline of the US's war in Afghanistan

- **September 11, 2001:** Al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four commercial aircraft and crashed them into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC. The fourth airliner crash-landed in a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. Soon after, Osama bin Laden, the head of the Islamist terror group, was identified as the man behind the attack.
- **September 18, 2001:** Taliban, the regional Islamic political and military force running Afghanistan, was protecting Bin Laden and refused to hand him over to the United States. In response, then US President George W Bush signed into law the Authorisation for Use of Military Force (AUMF). As per this law, the country could use force against the nations, organisations or persons behind the 9/11 attack — namely the Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Over the years, the AUMF was used as the legal rationale for the US' decision to invade Afghanistan, and use force against the Al-Qaeda and its associates, both on and off the battlefield.
- **October 7, 2001:** American and British forces jointly launch attacks on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This was the opening salvo in the US' proposed "war on terror". The mission, dubbed 'Operation Enduring Freedom', began with a series of air strikes which did manage to soften Taliban defences. Following this, a number of US special forces, Northern Alliance, and ethnic Pashtun anti-Taliban forces provided support on ground.
- **November, 2001:** Taliban forces began to crumble and retreat from several of their strongholds across the country, including Kabul. Later that month, the UNSC called for the formation of a transitional administration and invited member states to send across peacekeeping forces for maintaining stability. Several Al-Qaeda fighters remained in hiding in the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan, where they constantly sparred with anti-Taliban Afghan forces, which were backed by the US.
- **December, 2001:** The All-Qaeda initiated a truce, which many now believe was merely a coverup to help Bin Laden and several other al-Qaeda leaders escape into Pakistan. When the Tora Bora cave complex, formerly inhabited by the Al-Qaeda was captured, there was no sign of Bin Laden.
 - In early December, the UN invited a number of major Afghan factions to a conference in Germany, where the Bonn Agreement was signed. The agreement provided for an international peacekeeping force to maintain security and peace in Kabul.



- On December 9, the Taliban surrendered Kandahar and Taliban leader Mullah Omar fled the city. This is widely considered to have been the end of the Taliban regime in the country. But several Al-Qaeda leaders were still hiding in the mountains. By December 21, an interim Afghan government was sworn in.
- **March 2, 2002:** US-led coalition forces faced off with around 800 Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the Shar-i Kot Valley near the Pakistan border in one of the most brutal confrontations in the history of the US-Afghanistan war. This was also around the time the US began diverting some of its military and intelligence resources from Afghanistan to Iraq, which the country was seeing as a growing threat in its “war on terror”.
- **April, 2002:** In a speech delivered at the Virginia Military Institute, President Bush announced a “Marshall Plan” for Afghanistan. However, development efforts in the country did not receive adequate funding as the US had already turned its attention towards the situation in Iraq.
- **May 1, 2003:** The then-US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld announced an end to “major combat” in Afghanistan. On the same day, President Bush made a similar announcement about combat operations in Iraq. At the time, there were around 8,000 US troops in Afghanistan.
- **October 9, 2004:** The country’s first democratic elections since the fall of the Taliban was held and around 80 per cent of Afghanistan’s voting population cast their ballot for Hamid Karzai, who was serving as an interim leader before the polls. Parliamentary elections were conducted soon after, in which several women candidates were elected to seats specially reserved for them to ensure gender diversity.
- **October 29, 2004:** Osama Bin Laden released a recorded message days after the presidential election, in which he mocked the Bush administration and claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks.
- **2005:** The year 2005 was marked by the gradual resurgence of the Taliban with violence increasing across the country. But this time they changed their tactics — while they had once engaged in open combat with the US and NATO forces, they were now resorting to suicide bombings and using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), resulting in many casualties.
 - The return of Taliban also coincided with an increasing anti-American and Anti-Western sentiment among Afghan people, who were grappling with the sudden rise in violence, coupled with widespread corruption within their government and reports of prisoner abuse at US detention facilities.
- **2006:** Cracks began to appear within the NATO, as some member states sparred on troop commitments to Afghanistan. At the Riga conference that year, the alliance’s General Secretary Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said that NATO forces should be able to gradually hand over responsibility to Afghanistan’s security forces in 2008. He urged countries to commit more troops with less national restrictions in the meantime.
- **2007:** Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, one of the Taliban’s top leaders, was captured in Pakistan. Months later, the Taliban’s top military commander Mullah Dadullah was killed by US forces.
- **2009:** Then-US President Barack Obama announced that he was increasing military presence in Afghanistan to 68,000 troops, making good on one of his key campaign promises of shifting military focus from Iraq to Afghanistan.
 - During a two-day NATO conference in April, member states vowed to send an extra 5,000 troops to help train Afghan security forces and provide security during the presidential elections in August.
 - In November, Hamid Karzai was sworn in as President for another term following an election marred by fraud allegations.
- **2010:** The number of American war deaths had crossed the 1,000 mark by early 2010. It was around this time, General Stanley McChrystal, who was then the commander of NATO-US forces in Afghanistan, was relieved of his post following the release of a controversial article in the Rolling Stone, in which he and members of his staff criticised several top Obama administration officials. He was replaced by General David Petraeus, head of the military’s Central Command.



- In November, NATO members signed a declaration stating that they would hand over responsibility for maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan to Afghan's own security forces by the end of 2014.
- **2011:** On May 1, 2011, Bin Laden was killed by US forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where he was hiding with some of his family members. He was buried in the Northern Arabian Sea the same day.
 - By June, Obama announced his plans to withdraw 30,000 troops by 2012. At the time, Obama was facing overwhelming pressure from the American public, who were largely against the war in Afghanistan, as per polls.
 - In September, former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, a central figure in reconciliation negotiations, was assassinated in a suicide bombing incident.
- **2012:** Tensions began to rise between the US and Afghan government after a video showing Marines urinating on dead Afghans surfaced on social media. Within weeks, protests broke out after reports suggested that US soldiers had burnt copies of the Quran at a military base.
 - In March, a US soldier allegedly broke into several homes near Panjwai, shooting dead 17 Afghan villagers, a majority of whom were children and women. Days later, the Taliban suspended talks with the US and the Afghan government.
- **2013:** NATO handed over control of security to Afghan forces. Instead, the coalition focussed on military training and counter-terrorism in the region. Meanwhile, the Taliban and US officials resumed talks in Doha, Qatar.
- **2014:** President Obama unveiled his plan for withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.
 - In September, Ashraf Ghani was elected president after a lengthy delay following the presidential election. He signed the Bilateral Security Agreement, which Karzai had previously refused to sign towards the end of his presidency, which permitted approximately 13,000 foreign troops to remain in the country.
 - On December 28, the US and NATO formally ended their combat mission in Afghanistan.
- **2017:** The US dropped a massive GBU-43 bomb, dubbed the “mother of all bombs”, in eastern Afghanistan, targeting a series of caves occupied by Islamic State militants. This was the first time the country used a bomb of this size in conflict. The bomb hit a “tunnel complex” in the Achin district of the Nangarhar province, close to Afghanistan's border with Pakistan.
 - In August, former President Donald Trump outlined a new strategy for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan in a televised speech to troops at Fort Myer military base in Virginia. “My original instinct was to pull out, and historically I like following my instincts,” Trump said. “But all my life, I've heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office.”
 - He invited India to play a greater role in restoring peace in Afghanistan, while condemning Pakistan for harbouring Taliban forces.
- **2019:** The US ramps up peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha. Taliban officials vowed to block International terrorist groups from Afghanistan in exchange for the US withdrawing its troops.
 - In September, Trump abruptly called off peace talks merely a week after the US' Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad announced he had brokered an agreement “in principle” with Taliban leaders. Trump claimed his decision was sparked by the recent killing of a US soldier by Taliban fighters.
- **2020:** The US and Taliban signed an agreement, paving the way for foreign troops to be significantly withdrawn from Afghanistan. But without a ceasefire, Taliban fighters launched a series of attacks on Afghan security forces in the days that followed. In response, the US launched an airstrike against the Taliban forces stationed in the Helmand province.
 - In November, US Defence Secretary Christopher C Miller announced plans to halve troops to 2,500 by January. Following the US-Taliban agreement, thousands of troops had already been withdrawn.

- **2021:** President Joe Biden announced that the US will not meet the May 1 deadline for withdrawing troops laid down in the US-Taliban agreement. Instead, troops will retreat completely by September 11, 2021, he said.

