Singaporeans ponder return to Japan

BY NEO WEN TONG

His bags are packed, his air tickets are booked for Wednesday and he is set to leave for Tokyo.

Mr Lee Chee How, 22, will be starting classes for his economics degree at Hitotsubashi University on April 17.

Despite reports about the unfolding nuclear crisis in Japan, he remains unfazed. But he admits his parents are worried. To assuage their concerns, he says that "we've agreed to sit down together on Tuesday night to review the situation in case anything crops up".

Mr Ng Ying Jian, 24, president of the Singapore Students Association in Japan, said at least 16 of the 40 students he contacted last week said they would be heading back to Japan where the spring term at many universities begins this month.

The rest have not made up their minds, he added. The association has about 100 members.

As for Mr Ng, he is adopting a wait-and-see approach.

The final-year engineering student at the University of Tokyo said his school term will start a month later, on May 6, because of the devastating quake on March 11.

He said: "My family is worried and wants me to try to defer my studies or transfer to another school, but ultimately the decision still rests with me. "Right now, I'm just waiting for the situation to stabilise."

As a precaution, he will be packing some dry rations - enough to last him for a few months - should he decide to return to Tokyo.

When contacted, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it continues to advise Singaporeans against all non-essential travel to Japan.

Universities here say they have either suspended exchange programmes or cautioned students against heading to Japan. The Singapore Management University said students bound for exchange programmes in Japan were advised on March 16 not to proceed as planned. Seven of the 11 students have cancelled their plans.

The National University of Singapore said it has recalled all exchange students in the Kanto and Tohoku regions, including Tokyo. It is also encouraging students in other regions to consider returning to Singapore. No numbers were given.

Over at Nanyang Technological University, six students were affected when the university decided early last week to suspend all exchange programmes based in Tokyo.

But students are not the only ones who may miss classes when the new term starts in Japan. Assistant language teacher Linda Low, 33, will not be there for her students in Fukushima city. In fact, she is not even sure if classes will resume at the school, which is 60km from the crippled nuclear plant.

Ms Low, who returned to Singapore on March 10, said she made it back thanks to help from local people.

Recounting her experience, she said: "I told myself: 'If I get out of this alive, I'm going to shave my head.'" And she did, after she set foot here.

Mr Leonard Cheong, 27, who was teaching in Iwaki city in Fukushima prefecture, said he has been given the option of terminating his two-year contract.

But Mr Cheong, who flew back on March 14, has yet to do so. He said: "When I left, I felt like I was abandoning the people who loved and cared for me."

Mr Low and Mr Cheong, along with fellow teacher Teo Ying Ying, 24, will be sharing their experiences at 9.0-Voices from the Ground, a fund-raising event tomorrow.

Additional reporting by Goh Kai Shi and Yuen Sin