

Fukushima Crisis Concealed: Japanese government kept worst-case scenario under wraps 福島危機の隠蔽—日本政府は最悪事態の想定図を公表しなかった

Asia-Pacific Journal Feature

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 12 Number 30 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

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The Japanese government buried an official report in March 2011 outlining a worst-case scenario, including the evacuation of Tokyo, while emergency workers struggled to contain the crisis at Fukushima Daiichi, according to numerous media reports. Combined with separate revelations that a task force chaired by the prime minister failed to keep records of its meetings, these developments raise serious concerns about the government's willingness to communicate openly and to accept public scrutiny over its management of the nuclear crisis.

A report delivered to then Prime Minister Kan Naoto on March 25 warned that if the situation at the plant spun completely out of control, authorities would have to issue mandatory or voluntary evacuation orders for all people living

within 250 kilometers (155 miles) of the plant - a zone including greater Tokyo (population 35 million, the world's top city in terms of GDP) and the major cities of Sendai (pop. 1 million) and Fukushima (pop. 280,000).

Fearing widespread panic, the government chose to withhold the 15-page report compiled at Kan's request by the Japan Atomic Energy Commission. "It contained such shocking content that we decided to treat it as if it never existed," said a senior government official quoted by the *Mainichi Daily*.

Over the following weeks, the prime minister and high-level officials maintained there was no need to widen the evacuation perimeters (20-km mandatory, 30-km voluntary, with some municipalities outside the zone added in April), while the United States recommended a minimum distance for evacuation of 80 kilometers and several embassies advised their citizens to leave the capital.

On March 31, the Japan External Trade Organization and several ministries (including the ministries of foreign affairs, transportation and the environment) co-hosted a briefing for foreign companies operating in Japan. Several companies, including Germany's industrial heavyweight Bosch, inquired specifically about the government's worst-case scenario to assess

the risk of maintaining employees in Tokyo. A foreign affairs ministry official repeatedly refused to address their concerns, maintaining that the capital was open for business.

The first hint of an official scenario surfaced in September when Kan told a Tokyo newspaper that the prospect of evacuating Tokyo had convinced him to abandon nuclear power. "Not only would we lose up to half of our land, but spread radiation to the rest of the world," he told the Wall Street Journal on Jan. 26. "Our existence as a sovereign nation was at stake."

On January 6, Environment Minister Hosono Goshi (who acted between March and September as special advisor on the nuclear crisis) acknowledged the existence of a document but downplayed its significance, saying that "residents had enough time to evacuate" and that the government wanted to avoid causing "excessive and unnecessary worry." Specific details emerged after January 22 with stories by the *Mainichi* and *Associated Press*, the latter having obtained a copy of the report.

These revelations shed additional light on the Japan Nuclear Energy Safety Organization's admission in October that on March 25, the same day the worst-case scenario report was delivered to the government, it had begun secret calculations to assess the probability of a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. At the time, TEPCO and the Nuclear Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), which was briefed on the calculations, continued to insist that the fuel rods had suffered only "partial damage," only admitting to the likelihood of multiple meltdowns in late May. In December, an investigative committee blamed the "lack of timely information" provided by TEPCO and NISA on interference from the prime minister's office, which had imposed pre-approval of all

information released to the press.

In a separate development, an investigation by national broadcaster NHK forced Industry Minister Edano Yukio to admit on January 24 that the nuclear disaster task force chaired by the prime minister had failed to keep any records of its meetings, leaving no trace of the crucial debates and decisions - including the scope of evacuation orders - that occurred in the weeks and months following the accident. Edano has requested NISA to compile minutes of the meetings by the end of February based on notes taken by attendees.

This latest blunder prompted the *Asahi Shimbun* to denounce on January 26 a "monumental level of ineptitude" and "deliberate negligence" on the part of NISA, ministry bureaucrats and the political leadership, and to call for recording equipment to be installed in all major meeting rooms of the prime minister's official residence.

Impact on nuclear plant "stress tests"

A critical overview of the government's actions over the past nine months, which entails piecing together a regular flow of seemingly disconnected revelations, scandals and late admissions, does not bode well for the administration of Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko 's attempt to present a nation-wide safety review of nuclear power plants (NPPs), paving the way for reopening the plants - through an evaluation process know as "stress tests" - as an exercise in transparency.

The shutdown of Chugoku Electric's last

reactor at Shimane NPP on January 27 leaves only three of Japan's 54 commercial units active (of which units 1-4 at Fukushima Daiichi are set for decommissioning), including a Kansai Electric unit at Takahama, one at TEPCO's Kashiwazaki Kariwa plant, and another at Hokkaido Electric's Tomari. All three reactors are set to go offline by the end of April.

But the process to restart plants after assessing their safety and gaining local approval, the two conditions set by the government, is being met with a heavy barrage of criticism that ranges from the assertions concerning absence of reliable criteria for the tests to alleged conflicts of interest among those involved in the safety review.

Another accusation reminiscent of the "nuclear village" mentality – which according to critics encompasses cozy relations between industry, regulators and government, as well as a tendency to ignore or even suppress negative assessments – was leveled on January 27 by two members of NISA's advisory committee on stress tests.

Speaking at the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Tokyo, Goto Masashi, a former NPP design engineer, and Ino Hiromitsu, Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, said that in order to expedite the review process, the agency deliberately omitted their critical opinions from an interim report endorsing the tests conducted by Kansai Electric on units 3 and 4 of the Oi NPP in Fukui Prefecture.

In a joint statement, the experts called the tests "an optimistic desk simulation based on the

assumption that 'everything would happen exactly as predicted'" and a "wrongful process that has as its only purpose the confirming of reports submitted by the operators, reports which have numerous flaws and defects." They added that the one-week visit by a delegation from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – whose objective, as described by its leader James Lyons, was to determine whether NISA's methodology was consistent with IAEA standards – would not yield anything beyond "another coating over the real risk" posed by nuclear plants in Japan.

The tests were endorsed by the UN agency on January 31 with Lyons commenting that the team was "very impressed with the way Japan quickly implemented the emergency safety measures after the accident in March," and that "NISA had done a good job in the transparency of information on their website," according to Reuters.

In what could signal a major setback for the prime minister, Edano told the *Asahi* on January 26 that he didn't expect any nuclear plants to be operating this summer. He said he was optimistic that Japan would handle the situation by relying on thermal plants and other sources of energy.

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