

Japanese government delayed nuclear emergency measures to protect TEPCO profits

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It is now clear that Prime Minister Naoto Kan's government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which owns the stricken Fukushima Daiichi plant, delayed essential measures to tackle the emergency at the facility in order to protect TEPCO's investments. There is also mounting evidence that joint government-TEPCO cover-ups have continued throughout the unfolding crisis.

More than a week after the earthquake and tsunami that hit the country, the situation at the facility remains on a knife edge despite days of desperate fire-hosing, water-bombing and other activities that have exposed the plant workers and fire fighters to high radioactivity levels.

Nuclear experts warned that the restoration of power to some Fukushima units on Sunday and the reported placing of two other reactors into "cold shutdown" did not necessarily end the dangers. "Overall, the situation remains very serious," the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said at a media conference yesterday.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on the weekend that TEPCO had considered using sea water to cool one of the plant's six reactors as early as the morning of March 12, the day after the quake struck, but delayed until that evening and did not use seawater at other reactors for another day. The company's concern was to protect its long-term investment in the Fukushima complex, because seawater can corrode a nuclear reactor, rendering it permanently inoperable.

TEPCO "hesitated because it tried to protect its assets," Akira Omoto, a former TEPCO executive and member of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission, told the financial newspaper. A government official stated: "This disaster is 60 percent man-made. They failed in their initial response. It's like TEPCO dropped and lost a 100 yen coin while trying to pick up a 10 yen coin."

Because the government was committed to leaving the emergency response in the hands of the private owner—the fourth largest power company in the world—official efforts were also critically delayed. Fire-fighting and military resources were not utilised in the cool-down operations in a substantial manner until last Wednesday, after four of the six reactors had already suffered damage and the remaining two showed signs of heating. A military spokesman said forces did not move in because they were not requested by TEPCO.

Other evidence indicated that the Fukushima complex had already been disabled by the magnitude-9 earthquake before the tsunami flooded the backup generators. Kazuma Yokota, a safety inspector for Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) who was in the plant when the quake struck, told the *Wall Street Journal* that he ducked under a desk as the initial shock cracked the walls. The inspector then moved to his monitoring office, a 15-minute drive away. "There was no power, no phone, no fax, no Internet," he said.

These power and communication failures show that the plant was not built to withstand a major earthquake, despite years of assurances to the contrary by TEPCO and successive Japanese governments. Yet TEPCO remains in control of the response, just as BP was left in charge of last year's Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster.

Yesterday, TEPCO reported a spike in pressure in a holding vessel around reactor 3—which contains highly toxic plutonium—forcing engineers to consider releasing more radioactive material into the atmosphere. Officials warned that the release would be larger than in the previous explosions during the week because more nuclear fuel had degraded. They said the process would involve the emission of a cloud dense with iodine, krypton and xenon.

Later in the day, TEPCO temporarily suspended the venting plan. Hikaru Kuroda, a TEPCO manager, said temperatures inside the reactor had reached 300 degrees Centigrade but had "stabilised" after seawater was continuously pumped in.

On Saturday, the dangers to human health were underscored when Japan's health ministry reported that an abnormal amount of a radioactive material was detected in spinach grown about 110 kilometres northeast of Tokyo. The material, iodine-131, was also detected in milk from a dairy farm about 50 kilometres from the plant. Later, the science ministry said a radioactive substance had been detected in tap water in Tokyo and five nearby prefectures.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano, the government's spokesman, insisted that the amounts of material detected would not immediately affect human health, but experts warned that even traces of radiation could harm children. IAEA official Gerhard Proehl told a Vienna news conference that iodine-131 levels in the milk were up to 15 times the level suitable for infants.

News of the contamination heightened the concerns among

ordinary people that the government had failed to issue timely and complete information from the outset of the nuclear disaster. “The biggest problem is that we’re not getting the whole picture from the government, from the media,” Takamasa Edogawa, 76, told the *Los Angeles Times* as he waited in a line outside a Tokyo supermarket.

Mayumi Mizutani, who was shopping for bottled water, told the Associated Press she was worried about the health of her visiting two-year-old grandchild after radioactive iodine was found in Tokyo’s tap water. She expressed fears that the infant could get cancer. “That’s why I’m going to use this water as much as possible,” she said.

Further evidence has emerged of the culpability of TEPCO and the government for this catastrophe. Officials have admitted that they gave potassium iodide, which helps reduce the risk of throat cancer, to people living within a 20 kilometre-radius of Fukushima only three days after an explosion that should have triggered an immediate distribution. Kazuma Yokota, a safety official, said: “We should have made this decision and announced it sooner. It is true that we had not foreseen a disaster of these proportions.”

TEPCO submitted a report to NISA, the safety regulator, 10 days before the quake hit on March 11 admitting that it had failed to inspect 33 pieces of equipment in its six Fukushima reactors. Inspectors had faked records for up to 11 years, pretending to make thorough inspections when in fact they were only cursory, TEPCO said. Inspections, which were voluntary, also did not cover other devices related to cooling systems, including water pump motors and diesel generators.

“Long-term inspection plans and maintenance management were inadequate,” NISA concluded in a report two days after TEPCO’s admission. Nevertheless, the agency gave TEPCO until June 2 to draw up a corrective plan. A NISA official who declined to be named told Agence France-Presse: “We can’t say that the lapses listed in the (February 28) report did not have an influence on the chain of events leading to this crisis.”

It is now clear that TEPCO’s decades-long record of flouting elementary safety requirements, falsifying reports to regulators and covering up potential nuclear disasters, with the assistance of one government after another, continued right up to the Fukushima catastrophe.

This is despite supposed government intervention on previous occasions, including in 2002, when TEPCO admitted fabricating more than 200 safety reports dating back to 1993, and in 2007, when a much smaller 6.8-magnitude earthquake shut down TEPCO’s seven-reactor Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant, the world’s biggest, and more radiation leaked than TEPCO initially acknowledged (see: “Japan’s TEPCO: a history of nuclear disaster cover-ups”).

Repeated attempts by TEPCO and the Kan government to play down the significance of the crisis over the past week have proven to be equally misleading. Three explosions over three days in reactors No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 were followed by two fires in the fuel pool of reactor No. 4. By mid-week, TEPCO and the government were forced to resort to untested methods, sending helicopters to water-bomb the reactors and fire trucks to help pump seawater into them.

The disorganised and contemptuous character of the official response was further evidenced by reports that the company had agreed with Kan during the week that 180 workers would remain in the plant, working in shifts to prevent a meltdown. TEPCO is known to employ unqualified day labourers, earning just 9,000 yen (\$US113) a day, who have little knowledge of the plant’s technology and dangers.

The 180 have all received significant doses of radiation that will inevitably damage their long-term health. Already, two are missing, presumed dead, 21 have reportedly been injured or taken to hospital, and 19 have been treated on site for radiation exposure.

According to the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper, TEPCO asked the government to permit a full withdrawal of the last workers from the plant because of high levels of radiation. Kan, however, told TEPCO: “Withdrawal is impossible. It’s not a matter of whether TEPCO collapses. It’s a matter of whether Japan goes wrong.”

These revelations illustrate the readiness of the entire Japanese ruling elite to sacrifice the lives, health and safety of ordinary working people not only to safeguard the profits and investments of its giant power utilities, but also to maintain a central axis of its strategic and economic strategy—the pursuit of nuclear energy.

Even though Japan is one of the most earthquake- and tsunami-prone areas of the world, more than 55 nuclear reactors have been built since 1970, including seven new ones opened in 2008. These reactors, which now provide 34.5 percent of the country’s electricity, are regarded as a “lifeline” to shield the Japanese business and military establishment from denial of access to global oil and gas supplies.

Across Japan, there is also growing distress over the escalating toll from the tsunami disaster. The national police agency said 8,450 people had been confirmed dead and 12,931 were officially listed as missing—a total of 21,381—as of last night. But this figure is sure to rise.

Miyagi police chief Naoto Takeuchi told a task force meeting yesterday that his prefecture alone “will need to secure facilities to keep the bodies of more than 15,000 people,” *Jiji Press* reported.

The whereabouts of nearly 19,000 people are still unknown, according to figures compiled by the *Asahi Shimbun*. The casualty figure does not include those who died at evacuation centres or medical facilities where victims were transported. At least 25 people have died in evacuation centres in Fukushima alone.



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