

Japan's nuclear cover-up

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Yesterday marked one month since the massive March 11 earthquake and tsunami that devastated much of north-eastern Japan and produced the worst nuclear disaster since the 1986 reactor explosion at Chernobyl in the Ukraine. While Japanese politicians, officials and representatives of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) marked the occasion with profuse apologies and soothing reassurances, there is no doubt that a concerted operation remains in place to downplay the extent of the catastrophe and the ongoing dangers.

The dissembling of Japanese officials might take a national form, with elaborate acts of contrition, but the underlying reasons for the cover-up are universal in character. Throughout the crisis, the government and TEPCO have been driven, not by concerns about Fukushima residents or the safety of workers at the plant, but a determination to preserve the profitability of TEPCO and the country's nuclear industry at all costs.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano yesterday offered condolences to the families of the 27,000 dead and missing and apologies to the displaced victims of the earthquake disaster. Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) spokesman Hidehiko Nishiyama offered his own apologies for the "inconvenience" created by the exclusion zone around TEPCO's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant.

At the same time, however, Edano put the best possible spin on the ongoing crisis at the crippled nuclear plant, declaring: "The possibility that the situation at the nuclear plant will deteriorate and lead to new leakage of massive radioactive materials is becoming significantly smaller." While not a direct lie, the comment deliberately obscures the real dangers that remain as engineers and workers struggle to bring damaged reactors under control. The previous day, Edano had defended the government's response to the catastrophe, saying that "under very severe circumstances," as decisions had had to be made,

"I believe we have selected the best option every time."

In fact, throughout the past month, the government, NISA and TEPCO have acted in an ad hoc fashion, desperately seeking to improvise solutions to a disaster that they neither predicted nor prepared for. Despite Japan's well-known vulnerability to earthquakes and tsunamis, all of TEPCO's safety procedures failed. After the plant lost grid power, its backup diesel generators were inundated by the tsunami that swept over the facility's inadequate protective walls. Emergency batteries provided minimal power but soon ran out.

Of the plant's six nuclear reactors, units 4, 5 and 6 were already offline for inspection. The insertion of control rods into the cores of units 1, 2 and 3 shut down the reactor operations. However, without power and thus the reactor's normal cooling systems, the cores of 1, 2 and 3 continued to heat to dangerous levels, damaging the fuel rods and threatening a full-scale meltdown. The spent fuel pools associated with each reactor, which require continuous cooling, also began to heat. This included unit 4, where the entire reactor core had been removed from the reactor and placed in the spent fuel pool several months earlier.

Within days, hydrogen produced by damaged fuel rods exploded and ripped apart the upper levels of units 1, 3 and 4. Unable to restart normal cooling operations, TEPCO prevaricated then took the desperate measure of pumping salt water into the core of unit 1 and several fuel cooling pools. Makeshift methods of pumping fresh water into the cores of units 1, 2 and 3 were only established in late March. It is these systems on which TEPCO is relying to maintain what Edano described on Sunday as "a stable situation, relatively speaking" at the plant.

As if to underline the still precarious state of the Fukushima plant, a major aftershock yesterday measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale disrupted emergency cooling

systems to the reactors for about an hour before power was restored. Seismologists have warned that the risk of large tremors continues to be high. Even on the most optimistic assumptions, it will take months to restore normal cooling to the reactors and years to undertake the complicated process of dismantling the damaged reactors and cleaning up the site. The extent of core damage, including possible partial meltdown, to reactors 1, 2 and 3 is still unknown and subject to debate by nuclear experts.

Another indication of the ongoing dangers was the government's decision yesterday to extend the 20-kilometre exclusion zone around the plant to cover five towns and villages that housed around 115,000 people prior to the earthquake. For weeks, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is itself conservative in its assessment of nuclear risks, has been recommending an 80-kilometre exclusion zone. A fortnight ago, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors found high levels of the long-lived isotope cesium-137 at the village of Iitate, 40 kilometres northwest of the plant.

From the outset, TEPCO, which has a long record of safety breaches and cover-ups, has provided inadequate, even wrong, information and minimised the dangers. The Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan yesterday was considering raising the official severity of the nuclear accident from five to seven, the highest level, on a par only with Chernobyl. Nevertheless, the government, NISA and TEPCO continue to be driven by commercial considerations.

In a revealing episode, TEPCO submitted a proposal on March 26 to the Fukushima prefecture to build two new reactors—units 7 and 8—at the very plant from which high level radiation was still leaking. Undaunted by the opposition of the local government, the corporation sent its unamended plans on March 31 for approval to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry—to which NISA is attached. Only when the story leaked to the press did TEPCO backpedal, declaring its proposal had been “a mistake.”

TEPCO's manoeuvre may have been politically inept, but it was no mistake. The company's objective all along has been to put the crisis behind it as quickly, and with as little cost, as possible. The company delayed the pumping of sea water at the plant as it was still hoping to salvage its reactors. Far from reining in the company, the

government has left TEPCO in charge, raised the possibility of providing billions in financial assistance and assisted in what can only be described as political damage control.

Last weekend, Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto flew to Jakarta for a special meeting with his counterparts in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). While ASEAN aid for Japanese earthquake victims was the nominal purpose of the gathering, Matsumoto had another important mission—to reassure ASEAN countries that Japan's nuclear technology was safe to use. Billions of dollars are involved. The International Nuclear Energy Development of Japan Company, in which TEPCO has a large stake, has or is seeking contracts to build nuclear reactors in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

The Fukushima disaster has underscored the corrosive and corrupting character of the profit system. It is not nuclear technology as such that presents the danger, but the social and economic order under which it has developed. If nuclear power remains in the hands of private corporations and under the domination of the capitalist market, the environment and public health and safety will inevitably be subordinated to the drive for profit. The only possible way in which nuclear energy could be safely harnessed would be under public ownership and the democratic control of the working people—that is, under socialism.

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