

Japanese PM faces political crisis over nuclear disaster

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The resignation of a top adviser to Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan has highlighted the growing public opposition to the government's handling of the disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant and its scant regard for the safety of nuclear workers and local residents.

Toshino Kosako, a Tokyo University professor appointed as a senior adviser in March, publicly resigned last Friday, accusing the government of failing to follow his advice and of making ad hoc decisions. "The government has belittled laws and taken measures only for the present moment, resulting in delays in bringing the situation under control," he said.

Kosako, an expert in radiation safety, was particularly incensed by a recent education ministry decision to raise the annual dosage limit for children in the Fukushima prefecture to 20 millisieverts—a 20-fold increase. The new guidelines, he said, "are inconsistent with international commonsensical figures and they were determined by the administration to serve its interests."

Kosako also criticised an earlier decision to raise the maximum annual dosage for nuclear workers from 100 to 250 millisieverts. The comparable limit for atomic workers in Germany is 20 millisieverts, and in the United States it is 50 millisieverts. In announcing that he was quitting, Kosako said: "There is no point for me to be here."

Kosako's resignation—a highly unusual step in Japan for an academic adviser—has compounded the political difficulties confronting the government. Prime Minister Kan was forced to defend his handling of the nuclear crisis amid hostile questioning in parliament over the weekend not only from the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also his own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Kan dismissed Kosako's criticisms, saying that his government had not acted in an impromptu fashion and had

followed the advice of the Nuclear Safety Commission. On the disputed radiation limits, the prime minister simply declared that "it was natural that there should be lots of different opinions among the experts."

Speaking to the upper house budgetary committee on Sunday, Kan pleaded for public understanding. The prime minister declared that he had been behind the announcement in mid-April by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) of a plan to stabilise its Fukushima plant in six to nine months. "It was me who has ordered the roadmap to be drawn up," he said.

The defensive tone of Kan's comments reflects the fact that he is under fire from all sides. Within the DPJ, supporters of Ichiro Ozawa, who challenged Kan for the party leadership last year, have been pushing for the prime minister to step aside.

The pressure has been magnified by the party's poor results in two rounds of local elections. In the second round on April 24, the DPJ lost seven of the ten mayoral contests in which it faced off directly against the LDP, and scored badly in city assembly elections.

Last Tuesday, Democrat lawmakers reportedly criticised Kan's response to the disaster caused by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami. "The next elections are national ones. If we go on as now, the DPJ will be destroyed," party vice-president Kenji Yamaoka told a meeting of more than 60 Democrat parliamentarians.

A Kyodo news agency survey last weekend underscored the widespread public opposition to the government. Just 1.3 percent of respondents thought that Kan was exercising "sufficient leadership" in dealing with the disaster produced by the March 11 quake. Nearly half—46 percent—felt that the prime minister was "not exercising much leadership" and 30 percent believed that he was not exercising leadership at all.

Some 24 percent wanted the prime minister to “resign immediately,” up from 14 percent in a similar poll just a fortnight ago.

These poll figures are just one reflection of the rising public suspicion and hostility over the government’s handling of the nuclear crisis. The education ministry decision to raising radiation dosage limits for schools provoked an angry protest by a group representing about 250 parents from Fukushima. The group visited the upper house of parliament on Sunday and presented government officials with a bag of radioactive dirt from a school playground in the prefecture.

Sachiko Satou from the Protect Fukushima Children from Radiation Association told the media: “How dare they tell us it is safe for our children. This is disgusting. They can’t play outside with such risks. If the government won’t remove the radioactive dirt then we’ll do it ourselves and dump it outside the headquarters of Tokyo electric [TEPCO].”

The group accused the Nuclear Safety Commission (NSC) of rubberstamping the new dosage limit after just two hours of discussions with government officials. NSC officials denied agreeing to the change, while education bureaucrats ducked for cover. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, an education ministry representative, Itaru Wananabe, told the group that 20 millisieverts was safe, while adding that the government would do all it could to bring the limit back down to 1 millisievert. His answer provoked “howls of derision” from those present.

The education ministry decision to raise the maximum dosage level was aimed at opening as many schools as possible quickly, without the expense of a costly cleanup of radioactivity. The *Guardian* reported that an estimated 75 percent of Fukushima schools might have levels of radioactivity that would exceed the old annual dosage limit of 1 millisievert.

A number of Fukushima schools also exceed the new 20 millisievert limit. According to the *New York Times*, the city of Koriyama, about 55 kilometres from TEPCO’s Dai-ichi plant, was already removing top soil at 15 elementary schools where dosages exceeded the 20 millisieverts limit and at 13 kindergartens where the radiation levels were slightly lower.

The newspaper explained: “The Education Ministry has also found similarly high levels at 13 elementary schools, kindergartens and preschools in the Fukushima prefecture.

In the city of Fukushima, 35 miles [55 kilometres] northwest of the plant, some schools have barred students from playing outside while at school. At least one school also requires children to wear hats and surgical masks, and to avoid contact with playground equipment.”

An American organisation, Physicians for Social Responsibility, issued a statement last Friday condemning the new dosage limit for Fukushima schools as “unconscionable.” It explained that children were more vulnerable to the effects of radiation than adults, adding that an annual dose of 20 millisieverts “exposes them to a 1 in 200 risk of getting cancer. And if they are exposed to this dose for two years, the risk is 1 in 100. There is no way that this level of exposure can be considered ‘safe’ for children.”

The criticism of the dosage limit for schools raises more questions about the exclusion zone around the Fukushima plant. The government initially imposed 20-kilometre evacuation zone and recommended that people living between 20 and 30 kilometres from the plant remain indoors. It has since ordered the evacuation of an additional five villages and towns outside the exclusion zone where high radioactivity has been reported. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission have recommended that Japan impose an 80-kilometre exclusion zone, which would include a number of large cities.

Protests over the government’s handling of the nuclear crisis have been growing both in size and frequency. *Mainichi Shimbun* reported that 2,000 people turned up for a seminar at Meiji University on nuclear safety, which organisers explained usually only attracted 30 to 40. Another 800 people had to be turned away. The May Day rally in Tokyo on Sunday organised by the National Confederation of Trade Unions was attended by 21,000 union members and supporters. Union bureaucrats capitalised on popular anti-nuclear sentiment by calling for a shift away from nuclear power generation.

All these signs point to a growing political crisis for the Kan government, which was already under siege prior to the March 11 protest.



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