

IAEA whitewashes worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl

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On June 1, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a preliminary report on the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The report is a whitewash, exonerating the Tokyo Electrical Power Company (TEPCO) and the Japanese government of blame. Its bland language is an attempt to suppress discussion and protect the nuclear industry from scrutiny.

The report comes as two more workers at the plant were found to have exceeded maximum doses of radiation. Two male workers, one in his 30s and the other in his 40s, have been exposed to more than the 250 millisieverts level legally allowed for nuclear workers in Japan. The government raised the limit from its previous level of 100 millisieverts after the disaster. Exposure to more than 100 millisieverts of radiation is thought to increase the lifetime risk of developing cancers.

Previously, three workers were found to have been exposed to over 1000 millisieverts after working in flooded tunnels under the Fukushima plant. This new revelation points once again to the dangers faced by workers on the site. The full extent of the workforce's exposure to radiation is not known. Workers involved in the recovery operations are still not subject to routine testing. Some 7,800 workers have been employed at Fukushima since the disaster, but only 1,800 have been checked for radiation exposure, according to the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*.

The two men involved in the most recent incident both worked in the control rooms of reactor 3 and reactor 4. They had not been working in the flooded tunnels. Their exposure to radiation points to high levels of contamination throughout the facility. They were subject to internal exposure as a result of breathing or ingesting contaminated material. The site is covered in radioactive dust. Many workers have been sleeping on site and taking their meals in potentially contaminated areas; few of them have protective clothing. It is doubtful that many of the contract workers on site have been warned of the risks.

The full extent of the contamination is only gradually becoming clear. Researchers from the Nuclear Waste Management Organization of Japan have found levels of contamination in soil samples beyond the 20-kilometre exclusion zone higher than those in the "dead zone" around Chernobyl.

One site about 25 kilometres northwest of the Fukushima nuclear plant produced soil samples with radiation from cesium-137 exceeding 5 million becquerels per square metre. Others were lower, at 1.48 million becquerels per square metre. But all were high enough to make the land uninhabitable and unfit for growing

crops or raising livestock.

Twenty-five years after the Chernobyl accident the land is still unsafe. Belarus, which received 80 percent of the fallout from Chernobyl, still has one fifth of its agricultural land that is unusable, which is costing the Belarus economy \$700 million a year.

The risks in Japan are greater because the population density is greater than in Belarus. Two million people are thought to have been affected by the fallout in Belarus. But in Japan the population is more than seven times greater than in Belarus.

The results of the soil survey show that dangerous levels of contamination have spread beyond the official exclusion established by the Japanese government around the Fukushima plant. Levels of contamination inside the exclusion zone are not known because only government scientists are allowed access. They have not published the results of any tests on soil contamination.

When asked for a comment about the figures, Tetsuya Terasawa for TEPCO said that the figures for soil contamination were in line with those found after a nuclear bomb test that disperses plutonium.

Contamination of soil over such a wide area is the result of atmospheric contamination resulting from the explosions that took place in the reactor buildings. At the same time, waterborne contamination is continuing. The water that has flooded the trenches and underground tunnels at the Fukushima plant is thought to be more heavily contaminated than that released into the atmosphere.

The water is reaching maximum depths and is expected to start overflowing within the next few days. Alternative storage and treatment facilities have still not been completed. A decontamination plant is unlikely to be ready until June 15 and an underground storage facility for contaminated water is scheduled to be completed by mid-August. Even when it is finished, the storage unit will be inadequate. There are already 105 million litres of radioactive water on the site and the storage tank will take only 10 million litres.

Water levels are rising because Japan is in its rainy season. Typhoon Songda, which recently passed through the area, increased the levels of water at the Fukushima plant dramatically. "We may have between five and seven days before the water levels reach the top of the trenches," Hikaru Kuroda, a TEPCO spokesperson said. The Bloomberg news agency was sceptical of

this projected timeframe and suggested the overflow could begin as early as June 6.

Quite apart from the risk of overflow, radioactive water is still leaking into the sea. By April 5, 10 million litres of contaminated water had been dumped into the sea. Efforts to fix a leak have not been successful. Fish in the waters off the plant have been found to contain dangerously high levels of caesium.

Nuclear experts have criticised TEPCO's response to the issue of water contamination. "The risk of overflow is as serious as the meltdown of reactor fuel rods that's already happened," Tetsuo Ito, head of the Atomic Energy Research Institute at Kinki University, told Bloomberg. "TEPCO should've acknowledged this risk weeks ago and could've taken any urgent measures."

The water currently accumulating on the site is heavily contaminated. Junichi Matsumoto of TEPCO told a press conference in Tokyo that the level of radioactivity was estimated to be 720,000 terabecquerels. Presumably this huge figure applies to the total amount of water on the site, but is not precise enough to be of scientific value.

The IAEA report has been produced against the backdrop of deepening crisis. But everything in it aims to calm public fears and give the impression that the situation is under control and conditions at Fukushima are stable. The reality is far from this.

Launching the preliminary report of a 12-nation fact-finding team, Denis Flory, deputy director of the IAEA, said that his primary concern was to rebuild public confidence in nuclear power following the disaster at Fukushima. He told a press conference that there was a need for new safety standards internationally, but that this would remain the responsibility of national governments.

The report praised the openness of the Japanese government and TEPCO in "answering the many questions of the mission to assist the world in learning lessons to improve nuclear safety." Yet even the Japanese government has criticised TEPCO for withholding information.

The report stressed that there had been no recorded health effects from the release of radioactive material from Fukushima. It states: "To date, no health effects have been reported in any person as a result of radiation exposure from the nuclear accident." But the health effects are unlikely to become clear for several years to come. The impact of the Chernobyl disaster is only now becoming measurable in terms of excess deaths.

The health of workers on site was being safeguarded by "highly-professional back up", the report claims. This claim is belied by the fact that two more workers have been found to have been exposed to high levels of radiation. Since the majority of the workers have not been tested it is impossible to know what the level of exposure has been for most of those working on the site.

At the report press launch, Denis Flory, deputy director general of the IAEA Department of Nuclear Safety and Security, admitted that the fuel in one reactor had melted. The preliminary report merely refers to "severe damage of the fuel". But TEPCO, which owns the stricken Fukushima plant, admitted last month that a meltdown took place in three of the reactors soon after the tsunami hit the plant, knocking out emergency power systems. A triple meltdown has never happened at any other nuclear facility.

Three days after the crisis began the temperature in number 2

reactor is now thought to have reached 2700°C, causing 54 percent of the core to melt. According to *World Nuclear News*, a conservative industry news source, 94 percent of the fuel in reactor 3 may have slumped to the bottom of the reactor containment vessel by March 14. In unit 1, the entire core is thought to have melted.

The damage to all three reactors would account for the high levels of radiation detected in the water that has flooded the site as a result of emergency cooling efforts.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan of Japan admitted in an interview with the *Financial Times* that TEPCO had underestimated the risk of a meltdown at Fukushima. But the IAEA has nothing but praise for the company. The IAEA report is a whitewash rather than a serious attempt to investigate the causes of the Fukushima disaster and the extent of the developing danger that now exists.

TEPCO say that they expect to be able to reduce contamination levels within the next three months. Nuclear experts are sceptical of this scenario. William Ostendorff, a member of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, speaking to the US Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, said that he thought the chances of success were six or seven out of 10.

"The problem is that too much policy has been focused on protecting TEPCO and not enough on the public", said Dr. Kiyoshi Kurakawa, who was previously a Japanese government health adviser.

Time magazine, a publication not usually noted for its criticisms of big business, described the attempts to drop water on the overheating reactors from helicopters as "designed more for PR than practicality".

The full IAEA report will be given to the Ministerial Nuclear Safety Conference that meets in Vienna at the end of June.



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