

Japanese report blames government/corporate nexus for Fukushima disaster

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A major report released on Thursday into last year's Fukushima nuclear catastrophe details the systematic collusion between government, the state bureaucracy and the nuclear industry in Japan that produced the world's worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown in the Ukraine.

The devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck northern Japan on March 11, 2011 rapidly led to a full-blown crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). The loss of power to the plant, followed by the failure of back-up supplies, produced partial meltdowns in three reactors—units 1, 2 and 3—and hydrogen explosions that badly damaged reactor buildings and discharged radioactive material.

The report was produced by the Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC), which was established by parliament last year. The creation of the commission—the first of its kind—was clearly aimed at dispelling widespread public distrust and opposition to the nuclear industry, which is notorious for misinformation and cover-ups. The findings are unusually blunt.

NAIIC is scathing of the government, the industry regulators and TEPCO, declaring that “they effectively betrayed the nation's right to be safe from nuclear accidents.” It concluded that “the accident was clearly ‘manmade’”—that is, the product of inadequate safety procedures and failure to institute measures whose necessity had been foreseen, but not put in place by TEPCO, and not insisted upon by governments or regulators.

At the Fukushima plant, engineers and workers struggled to respond to the unfolding disaster in conditions for which they had not been trained or drilled. The loss of power meant that the plant's control rooms, lighting and communications

were not functioning. Response manuals were out of date, and had key diagrams and documents missing. Emergency equipment was inferior to that used in normal operations. Debris and damage made the movement of people and equipment difficult.

“The Commission discovered that, in reality, an even worse situation could have developed at Units 2 and 3, and the situations at Units 5 and 6 could have easily worsened,” the report stated. “Damage to the spent fuel of Unit 4 could have occurred, with greater affect to the wider surrounding environment. There was a distinct potential at the time for this disastrous accident to result in an even more frightening scenario.”

TEPCO's response had been self-serving and inadequate. Neither its chairman nor president was available at the time of the accident. Its manual for responding to a severe accident “was completely ineffective and the measures it specified did not function.” TEPCO failed to adequately communicate the situation at Fukushima to the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) or the prime minister's office. As a result, Prime Minister Naoto Kan intervened directly, compounding the chaos at the plant.

The lack of information or a clear plan from the government, its agencies and TEPCO led to a disorderly evacuation of more than 145,000 local residents. “Evacuation orders were repeatedly revised as the evacuation zones expanded from the original 3-kilometre radius to 10 kilometres and later, 20 kilometres, all in one day,” the report stated. “Each time the evacuation zone expanded, the residents were required to relocate. Some evacuees were unaware that they had been relocated to sites with high levels of radiation. Hospitals and nursing homes in the 20-kilometre zone struggled to secure evacuation transportation and find accommodation; 60 patients died in

March from complications related to the evacuation.”

The report concluded that TEPCO, the regulatory bodies (NISA and the Nuclear Safety Commission) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) “all failed to correctly develop the most basic safety requirements—such as assessing the probability of damage, preparing for collateral damage from such a disaster, and developing evacuation plans for the public in the case of a serious radiation release.”

NAICC criticised TEPCO’s conclusion that the tsunami alone was responsible for the disaster. It pointed to evidence that the huge earthquake might have caused some damage before the wave struck. The issue is significant as TEPCO’s delays in strengthening the older reactors at Fukushima against quakes, and NISA’s failure to enforce guidelines, could lead to legal liability. As the report noted, TEPCO simply ignored a June 2009 deadline for a comprehensive anti-seismic analysis of the Fukushima facility and had made no structural reinforcements to Units 1, 2 and 3 by the time of the disaster.

According to the report, “researchers repeatedly pointed out the high possibility of tsunami levels reaching beyond the assumption made at the time of [the plant’s] construction, as well as the possibility of [reactor] core damage in the case of such a tsunami. TEPCO overlooked these warnings, and the small margins of safety that existed were far from adequate for such an emergency situation.” The regulatory authorities and TEPCO were aware that a tsunami could swamp the plant’s back-up electricity supplies, leading to a catastrophic loss of power, but did nothing.

The collusion between TEPCO and its regulators was institutionalised. NISA was part of the powerful METI ministry that was responsible for promoting the nuclear industry. The report described the relationship between the regulators and the power companies and their lobby group—the Federation of Electric Power Companies (FEPC)—as one of “regulatory capture,” in which “the oversight of the industry by regulators effectively ceases.”

The report added: “The Commission’s examination of the way safety regulations are deliberated and amended reveals a cozy relationship between the operators, regulators and academic scholars that can only be described as totally inappropriate. In essence, the regulators and the operators prioritised the interests of their organisations over the public’s safety, and decided that Japanese nuclear power

plant reactor operations ‘will not be stopped’.”

While limited in its scope and recommendations, the NAICC investigation of the Fukushima disaster is a devastating indictment of the way in which the government, regulatory agencies and power companies ignored warnings and failed to implement basic safety measures.

The report’s content makes absurd the attempt of NAICC chairman Kiyoshi Kurokawa to blame “the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the program’; our groupism; and our insularity.”

In the first instance, there has been no shortage of critics of the nuclear industry in general and TEPCO in particular. These people, particularly those employed in the industry, have been subjected to systematic harassment and bullying.

More fundamentally, the collusion between big business and government at the expense of public safety and health is not a peculiarly Japanese phenomenon, but a product of the profit system. The flouting of basic safety requirements by TEPCO and its regulators was not much different to BP’s disregard for essential safeguards that led to the Gulf of Mexico oil crisis in 2010.

The NAICC report noted: “As the nuclear power industry became less profitable over the years, TEPCO’s management began to put more emphasis on cost cutting and increasing Japan’s reliance on nuclear power. While giving lip service to a policy of ‘safety first,’ in actuality, safety suffered at the expense of other management priorities.”

Just 15 months after the Fukushima crisis, the Japanese government has given the go-ahead for the restarting of the country’s nuclear reactors, despite overwhelming public opposition. The No 3 reactor at the Oi nuclear plant recommenced operation on the same day that the NAICC report was released—that is, before any of its recommendations were discussed, let alone implemented. The decision was driven by same profit demands that produced last year’s catastrophe.



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