A ‘Village’ Undaunted:  
The Making of Japan’s Fourth Disaster

By Mel Gurtov

In March 2011, Japan experienced a “triple disaster” in the horrific earthquake, massive tsunami and subsequent meltdown of three of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

As Japan contemplates the future of nuclear energy in the country, the pro-nuclear government and the nuclear industry risk submitting the country to yet a fourth disaster — the continued influence of the so-called “nuclear village” that persists in promoting nuclear power in the face of overwhelming public opposition, writes Mel Gurtov.

ON MAY 5, A SUDDEN QUIET descended on Japan. For the first time in over 40 years, no nuclear power plant is in operation. With the last of Japan’s 54 nuclear power plants closed down for maintenance, Japan is, for the time being, a fully non-nuclear state.

How long will it stay that way? The forces arrayed in favor of restarting some nuclear plants would seem to far outweigh those in favor of ending nuclear power altogether. On one side is the so-called nuclear mura, or village — the pro-nuclear government-industry complex and its political supporters in Tokyo. Despite the “triple disaster” of 3/11 — the earthquake, the tsunami and the meltdown of three of the four Fukushima Daiichi plants — supporters of nuclear power believe Japan’s economic future depends on its continued generation. They will not be content with anything less than a full restoration of all the plants, which had been providing around 30 percent of Japan’s electricity. Already, the government has asked local officials for their “understanding” as the electric companies prepare to restart some reactors. In fact, as this article was going to press, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda was pressing his case hard to restart the Oi reactors 3 and 4 in western Japan.

On the other side is the increasingly vocal nuclear opposition — an aroused public, civil society organizations, local governments with nearby plants, and independent critics. Defying the usual script in which Japanese citizens accept what their leaders tell them, these individuals and groups are not about to let the powers-that-be off...
the hook. They are fearful of again being hoodwinked about the virtues of nuclear power; they no longer trust the words of government authorities or officials at Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO); and they are anything but reassured about the safety of the power plants — not just Fukushima Daiichi but all of them.

The latest Pew Research Center poll, released on June 5, reveals just how badly nuclear power is faring in Japan. Eighty percent of the 700 people polled expressed disapproval of the government’s handling of the nuclear crisis, and 70 percent supported “reduced” reliance on nuclear energy. TEPCO is almost universally criticized for its role in handling the nuclear situation. All the figures represent large increases in the public’s loss of confidence compared with the immediate post-meltdown period — and with good reason.

First of all, several investigative reports on the nuclear accident from inside and outside Japan have shown the other-worldly character of the nuclear mura. TEPCO and the other power plant operators presented an aura of absolute security before the accident, downplayed the risks of radiation and failed to use the emergency procedures that were in place. Now as before, power costs more than safety, and TEPCO officials are not about to retreat. Second, issues of great public concern that are relevant to a decision to restart nuclear power plant operations have not been opened to public discussion, much less resolved. These include the safe disposal of radioactive rubble, the need for continuous measurement of radiation levels, the prospects for a transition to renewable energy, the establishment of new safety standards for nuclear power, the safe disposal of spent nuclear fuel and the thousands of nuclear fuel rods that hold it, assurances about the safety of food grown in the nuclear meltdown area, and effective government communication of risks and options to the public.

There are also certain questions that the government and the nuclear industry failed to confront and may never confront, such as whether or not major population centers can really be evacuated in case of a total meltdown of a nuclear power plant, and whether they believe the Japanese public has a right as well as a need to know about the costs and risks of nuclear power. As Yoichi Funabashi, co-author of a highly critical report on decision-making during the accident (and an editorial board member of Global Asia), told the Asahi Shimbun, “The government later decided the public were still children who would panic if given the true information.”

The nuclear mura is undaunted in the face of the devastating indictment of the government and TEPCO delivered by various independent reports; this is Japan’s fourth disaster. The reports identified specific instances of gross incompetence, bureaucratic disconnects, and an arrogance of power — the “myth of absolute security” that the nuclear industry promoted. The reports also took aim at the structural problem of nuclear power — the all-too-cozy relationship between the nuclear industry and government leaders that blocked prompt, decisive action during the 3/11 disaster. To be sure, Prime Minister Naoto Kan lost his job and TEPCO executives had a crisis of confidence in the press. But a year after the disaster, the nuclear mura is alive, well and badly needing independent oversight, as Kan himself testified at a parliamentary hearing in late May. But it is at least an even bet that proposals to create an independent nuclear safety agency, one with its own professional staff not tied to the electric companies or subordinate to any ministry, will not succeed.

Rather than make drastic structural and bureaucratic changes, the Japanese government has committed 1 trillion yen (about $12.5 billion) in taxpayer funds to TEPCO for two years to ensure its revival; this includes funds for compensation as well as the rehabilitation of the plants. Households are expected to pay 10 percent more for their electricity. TEPCO’s advertising, meanwhile, stresses the need for nuclear power and the danger of electricity shortages if nuclear power is not restored. There is some truth to the argument that without nuclear power, energy conservation and renewable energy sources would have to increase dramatically, steps that are unlikely to take place as quickly as this summer. But as the Asahi Shimbun reported last year, TEPCO has exaggerated electricity demand and downplayed the ability of households to conserve. The scare put into the Japanese public and local government officials is that they will face much higher energy bills and a further decline in living standards if they continue to object to the restart of the nuclear power plants. Yet alternative soft-energy paths are available and are being researched by various groups. The issue before the Japanese people is not “surrender to the nuclear mura or die,” but how quickly and decisively to move to a conservation-plus-renewables strategy and start the long-term (and, yes, costly) decommissioning of the nuclear power plants.

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number of instances, such as the Vermont Yankee and Byron plants in Illinois, the owners were able to avoid fixing serious piping problems thanks to the NRC’s hands-off approach. Instead of being compelled to strengthen safety standards, these and other aging nuclear power plants are having their 40-year operating licenses renewed for another 20 years. (The Vermont Yankee case is still in litigation; but after the state senate denied a renewal license in February 2010, a federal appeals court refused this spring to intervene on Vermont’s side.)

The government-NRC-industry complex, in fact, functions much like the military-industrial complex: a revolving door that enables former commissioners to transition into industry jobs; close ties with key members of Congress who will vote to keep subsidizing the industry; and poor oversight to ensure against conflicts of interest. For the Pentagon, the complex enables the military to get most of the weapons and funds it requests. But that may be far less dangerous than the nuclear mura, where just one mistake could create an unimaginable disaster from which there is no exit. Put another way, even if the response to the Fukushima disaster had been excellent, with maximum saving of lives and property, the structural problem would remain and so too would the nuclear danger.

“The government needs to prevail on TEPCO and other power companies to end their arrogance,” said a Japan Times editorial on May 10. That may be wishful thinking. More to the point is what former Prime Minister Kan said: “Experiencing the accident convinced me that the best way to make nuclear plants safe is not to rely on them, but rather to get rid of them.” If the government consults the will of the people, that is what will happen.

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