Three Years On: Japan’s Unending Nuclear Crisis

Mel Gurtov
Three years on, many obstacles still lie in the way of those who would see Japan turn to alternative, safer sources of energy.

Kay Kitazawa
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Rotting at the Core: Why There Is No End to Japan’s Nuclear Crisis

By Mel Gurtov

Three years have passed since a powerful earthquake and tsunami off the coast of northeastern Japan in March 2011 triggered a massive disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, unleashing what at one point seemed the prospect of uncontrolled meltdown.

Despite the terrifying specter that hung over Japan and the world at the time, pro-nuclear forces in Japan today remain determined to forge ahead. Mel Gurtov takes a look at the obstacles that lie in the way of those who would see Japan turn to alternative, safer sources of energy.

THE FUKUSHIMA DAIICHI Nuclear Power Plant remains in critical condition, and consequently so does Japan. The plant has been plagued by problems despite being declared stable by former Prime Minister Naoto Kan in December 2011. Wastewater contamination and leaks, inadequate and delayed clean-up, and breakdowns of equipment are among the unsolved problems for the plant’s operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). About 200,000 tons of radioactive water containing high levels of cesium and strontium sit in 1,000 temporary containment vessels. Hundreds of tons have leaked from underneath the reactor into the soil and the Pacific Ocean. TEPCO reportedly has no way to stop the leaks or, because of high radiation levels, do a full-scope inspection of the reactors.1

The dumping of radioactive wastewater from Fukushima into the ocean may already be having an impact on the US West Coast. Scientists in California are tracking radiation levels in kelp, and some fish may be dangerous to eat.2 Meanwhile, Tohoku refugees — 83,000 people — still cannot return home; a few who do so, illegally, cannot hope to resume a normal life or reclaim their livelihoods. The area is a dead zone, and it seems safe to assume that it will remain so for at least another generation.

As The New York Times reported last September, the constant flow of bad news from Fukushima was “making a mockery of the authorities’ early vows to ‘return the site to an empty field’...”3

That fact has given a boost to anti-nuclear forces in Japan. They have fielded a powerful lineup that now includes all former Japanese prime ministers: Yasuhiro Nakasone, once a strong supporter of nuclear power; Yukio Hatoyama; Morihiro Hosokawa, an unsuccessful candidate in the recent election for governor of Tokyo; Naoto Kan; and Junichiro Koizumi, who has been particularly outspoken and has become Hosokawa’s principal political backer.4 The former premiers have called for an end to reliance on nuclear energy, and they have been joined by scientists, former government bureaucrats and leaders of non-governmental organizations who regard the situation at Fukushima as critical.

Kiyoshi Kurokawa, for instance, who headed a major official study of the Fukushima disaster by the Independent Investigation Commission (IIC), the first of its kind to be authorized by the Diet, called the government’s cleanup efforts “just one big shell game aimed at pushing off problems into the future.”

Kurokawa’s IIC study found that the triple disaster of March 11, 2011, was “Made in Japan” — which meant, he explained, that it was a product of a culture infected by “our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to ‘sticking with the program,’ our groupism; and our insularity.” The IIC report offered a devastating critique of how these cultural attributes led to individual and bureaucratic incompetence, conflicts of interest between the regulating agencies and those being regulated, the elevation of the organization’s interests above public safety, hence flawed decision-making in response to the unfolding tragedy.

What Kurokawa’s and other independent investigations pinpointed is the notorious influence on public policy of the so-called “nuclear village” (genshiryoku-mura), defined by one acute observer as “pro-nuclear advocates in the bureaucracy, Diet, business community, utilities, vendors and lenders.”5 The IIC does not use the phrase “nuclear village,” but the implications are clear from conclusions such as: “The existing regulations primarily are biased toward the promotion of a nuclear energy policy, and not to public safety, health and welfare,” and “The underlying issue is the social structure that results in ‘regulatory capture,’ and the organizational, institutional, and legal framework that allows individuals to justify their own actions, hide them when inconvenient, and leave no records in order to avoid responsibility.”

Some calls for reform, such as creating a new “nuclear regulatory authority that is not part of a ministry that promotes nuclear energy use,”6 have been heeded. But the new agency, the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA), created in September 2012, has been caught between conflicting pressures from rival camps and has very limited resources to determine nuclear plant safety. The nuclear village thus remains very much alive despite the government’s assumption of a majority stake in TEPCO, a strongly anti-nuclear publisher, continuing public health risks from radiation exposure,7 and the view of some critics that a repetition of 3-11, as the disaster is dubbed, is quite conceivable in the event of another earthquake.

How else to explain why the unresolved problems at Fukushima have not created a sense of crisis in Tokyo? Indeed, no plan has emerged to phase out nuclear energy, and TEPCO in mid-2013 even applied to restart two reactors. That request led the governor of Niigata Prefecture, where the reactors are located, to say: “Trying to push through the restarts now shows they’ve learned nothing from what happened in Fukushima. There must be a full accounting of why there was so much damage.”8 But the accounting has yet to emerge.

THE CASE FOR A NEW ENERGY POLICY

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NGO pressure groups this time around; the Fukushima disaster has at least had the virtue of galvanizing a sector of Japanese society that had been rather quiet before. Through research and publications, lobbying or legislation, the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies, the Citizens’ Nuclear Information Center, and cities such as Tokyo and Yokohama are all involved in pushing for greater, or even 100 percent reliance on renewable sources of energy, aiming in some cases at zero carbon emissions, and the rest of the world a means towards sustainable growth.”

Fortunately, some cities, led by Kyoto, and prefectures, including Fukushima, are not waiting for Tokyo to act. They are already moving away from nuclear energy, aiming in some cases at 100 percent reliance on renewable sources of electricity within 20 to 25 years.

CONCLUSION
Yoichi Funabashi, co-author of one of the sharpest critiques of the government’s handling of the 3-11 crisis and chairman of the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation (who also serves on the Editorial Board of Global Asia), wrote one year after the disaster’s “pacificist-to-the-point-of-avoidance approach to national security...” has been matched by our aversion to facing the potential threat of nuclear emergencies.”

TEPCO’s and the nuclear bureaucracy’s influence allowed the government to downplay such emergencies so as not to arouse public anxiety. Their claim of an unexpected crisis and confusion belied their belief in the myth of nuclear energy’s “absolute safety” and refusal to follow the precautionary principle when dealing with nuclear uncertainties. Now, of course, there is no question about the public’s anxiety: public opinion typically runs about 70 percent in favor of phasing our nuclear power.

Kan, who was prime minister at the time of the nuclear accident, testified that former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said in his memoirs that “the Chernobyl accident exposed the sicknesses of the Soviet system. The Fukushima accident did the same for Japan.” His conclusion was that Japan simply could not rely on the safety of nuclear plants, and that the best approach was “to get rid of them.”

What has been occurring in the post-Fukushima period is a tussle between those who want to move away from nuclear power, either gradually or immediately, and pro-nuclear advocates who are using the new regulatory authority as an excuse for restarting reactors. It is a game that puts the anti-nuclear forces at a major disadvantage. Abe and the nuclear village can claim that past problems are on their way to being solved. He announced before the Diet in February 2013 that once nuclear power plants had complied with the NRA’s new safety regulations, they could come back online. Those regulations went into effect in mid-2013, but how long it would take for any of the plants to be in compliance or whether they would evade the regulations with half-measures remains uncertain.

The anti-nuclear forces have two challenges: to convince people both that the claim of nuclear safety is specious and that Japan has alternatives to nuclear energy that will not dramatically raise costs or reduce the quality of life people have come to expect. Public opinion may be strongly anti-nuclear, but that does not mean that people can’t be swayed, or neutralized, by official promises to abide by stronger regulations. Opinion, after all, is not the same as behavior.

So long as Abe is prime minister, there is little hope of a paradigm shift on energy. The government’s standard argument that nuclear power is a matter of national security and economic necessity scares many people and energizes the bureaucracy. Under former Prime Minister Noda, the government had promised to phase out nuclear power by 2040. But the promise contained plenty of loopholes, and in any event, one prime minister’s promise could easily be overturned by another; that is what has happened under Abe.

In presenting the IIC’s report to the Diet, Kurokawa suggested that at bottom, the Fukushima disaster revealed the weaknesses of Japanese civil society, for it was no match for the power of the nuclear village. That fact constitutes the most serious challenge for Japan today: how to allow democratic decision-making to take its rightful place in shaping public policy.