

Japan nuclear crisis: How it happened - The nuclear lobby

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NUCLEAR CRISIS: HOW IT HAPPENED / 'Nuclear power village' a cozy, closed community

Three months have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake triggered a nuclear crisis that shows little sign of ending anytime soon.

This is the sixth installment in a series that examines what caused the unprecedented crisis, which has dealt a fatal blow to the myth of the safety of nuclear power plants in this country.

"The 'nuclear power village'—the promoters of atomic energy—was behind both the cause and expansion of the crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 plant," said Tetsunari Iida, head of the nonprofit Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies.

"They lack sufficient knowledge and technology, and the safety inspections they conduct are totally inadequate," Iida added.

The nuclear power village is the nickname for a tight circle of government entities, utilities, manufacturers and others involved in the promotion of nuclear power who believe nuclear plants are safe and reject out of hand any opposing views. Iida used the term "genshiryoku mura" (nuclear power village) in a magazine opinion piece in 1997, and it has now entered the vernacular. Mura means village, but also refers to a small, closed community.

The 52-year-old executive director said he realized the nature of the cozy ties among the members of the nuclear power village more than two decades ago.

At the time, he worked in the private sector as an engineer in charge of radiation safety evaluations at the Fukushima No. 1 plant. Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. had commissioned Toshiba Corp. to do the job, and Toshiba subcontracted it to Iida's firm.

His company's safety analyses were submitted to Toshiba, then to TEPCO and finally to the then International Trade and Industry Ministry.

Iida recalled being shocked when he once saw a safety assessment released by the ministry. The report's cover had been changed, but the contents were almost identical to one prepared by Iida and his fellow engineers. "They didn't do their own checks of our analyses or confirm whether things were really safe. No wonder accidents happen," Iida said.

The nuclear village has thrived under the government's treatment of nuclear energy as "national policy run by the private sector." The central government promotes nuclear power with subsidies and other support, and private utilities handle the building and operating of nuclear facilities. The nuclear-related portion of the national budget amounts to about 430 billion yen a year, and utilities invest 2 trillion yen every year in nuclear power.

The nuclear village really started to grow after the 1973 oil crisis. Since then, the planning and

construction of nuclear plants across the nation was promoted under the banner of “energy security.”

After the 1974 accident in which radiation leaked from the nuclear-powered ship Mutsu, the government established the Nuclear Safety Commission in 1978 to oversee the then Science and Technology Agency, which conducted basic research and development on nuclear power and the nation’s nuclear policy. The science agency also contained a bureau that was in charge of nuclear safety regulations at the time.

However, the 2001 restructuring of government ministries and agencies scaled back such regulatory bodies. The Natural Resources and Energy Agency that promotes nuclear power and industry regulator Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency were both placed under the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry, the successor of MITI.

This only encouraged a tighter relationship between two bodies with conflicting tasks.

The parts of the science agency that had led nuclear power development were divided and merged into the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, the revamped Nuclear Safety Commission and other entities.

“The Science and Technology Agency was small and powerless, so it wasn’t very dependable,” a senior official of a heavy industries company said.

Integrating the nuclear industry’s safety regulators into the industry ministry was apparently carried out with the full approval of the nuclear power village.

This system of having promoters and regulators under the same roof has been criticized for years, but prior to the Fukushima crisis, no administration had been keen to separate them.

At a October 2007 House of Councillors Budget Committee session, then industry minister Akira Amari of the Liberal Democratic Party, rebuffed calls for splitting the bodies up. “We’ll promote nuclear power while stepping on the brakes at the same time. Double checks can be done by the Nuclear Safety Commission,” he said.

The Democratic Party of Japan, while it was in the opposition, called for the creation of a “nuclear safety regulatory committee” by separating NISA from the industry ministry and integrating the agency with the Nuclear Safety Commission. But after the DPJ took power, it shifted to a more “realistic stance” and seemed to forget its earlier demands.

Responding to both domestic and international criticism, Prime Minister Naoto Kan on May 18 finally advocated allowing the Nuclear Incident Investigation and Verification Committee looking into the Fukushima fiasco to consider separating NISA from the industry ministry.

On June 1, the International Atomic Energy Agency urged the government to reform its regulatory authorities, saying it was necessary to ensure the independence of regulatory bodies and clarify their roles.

Tatsuru Uchida, critic and professor emeritus at Kobe College, said, “Both NISA and the NSC are part of the system that promotes nuclear power, which is national policy, even though they call themselves regulators.”

“The state and politicians bear an extremely heavy responsibility for not fixing this unreasonable system that overestimated safety and underestimated risks,” Uchida added.

But destroying the nuclear village is no easy task. The community involves heavy back-scratching and complex personnel relationships.

NISA was formed in the streamlining of the government. Although the agency was once headed by a former Science and Technology Agency official, its top posts are usually filled by former MITI bureaucrats—nuclear power promoters—including current agency head Nobuaki Terasaka. Also, NISA has accepted 80 on-loan employees of power utilities and other nuclear-related firms. One former Toshiba Corp. employee even served as a safety inspector at the Fukushima No. 1 plant, which uses Toshiba-made reactors.

Former NSC Chairman Atsuyuki Suzuki, who worked as a regulator at the troubled prototype fast-breeder reactor Monju in Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture, last year became head of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency, the operator of Monju.

Electric power firms have deepened relations with the bureaucracy by temporarily dispatching employees to government bodies and giving cushy jobs to retired bureaucrats in the so-called amakudari (descending from heaven) practice.

Since 2000, power companies have sent at least 100 employees to central government bodies for on-loan postings, according to the government. These government bodies include the NSC and other offices involved in safety at nuclear plants. TEPCO, which has sent 32 workers to the government, had de facto reserved seats at several posts, sources said.

Meanwhile, 68 former industry ministry officials have parachuted into postretirement jobs as executive board members or advisers at 12 of the nation's power companies over the past five decades, according to the industry ministry.

Toru Ishida, former director general of the Natural Resources and Energy Agency, an industry ministry-related body, became an adviser at TEPCO in January. He left his post at the utility at the end of April after his amakudari move was heavily criticized in the wake of the Fukushima crisis. He was seen as likely to become a TEPCO vice president.

As of May 2, there were still 13 former industry ministry officials working at TEPCO and 10 other power companies.

To cut these cozy ties, former NSC Chairman Shojiro Matsuura said the members of the nuclear power village "must reflect on their actions as academics in terms of ethics and safety consciousness."

"They need to stop being a closed clique and turn themselves into a group of trusted professionals," Matsuura said.

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<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T110615005652.htm>
