

Japan: symposium manipulated, collusive ties between gov't and power companies

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Gov't unit, utilities sought to manipulate symposiums on nuclear power

TOKYO (Kyodo) — Seven Japanese power utilities had urged their employees and affiliated firms' workers to participate in symposiums related to the use of nuclear power generation, while three of them had local residents and employees pitch prepared questions and opinions at the events, the industry ministry said Friday.

Of the seven companies asked by the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry to submit reports on possible maneuvering of such events, Chubu Electric Power Co. and Shikoku Electric Power Co. said they were asked by the government's nuclear safety agency to have local residents pose questions in favor of Japan's nuclear projects.

Chubu Electric said Friday it was asked by the agency to have local residents pitch questions favoring the firm's "pluthermal" nuclear project at a related symposium sponsored by the government in 2007. In its 2008 symposium, around half of the participants were filled by employees, and the utility had asked them to make comments in support of the utility's operations.

Chubu Electric's case was the first revelation of the government's involvement in a suspected attempt to manufacture public opinion on nuclear power. Chubu Electric drafted a list of questions, but eventually rejected the request, considering it was inappropriate.

The electricity firm serving the southern part of central Japan said it asked its employees to attend the August 2007 symposium for local people to get a better grasp of the plutonium-thermal project planned for its Hamaoka plant in Shizuoka Prefecture. The utility, however, denied an allegation that it asked participants to voice certain opinions there.

Pluthermal power generation uses plutonium-uranium mixed oxide fuel in an existing reactor and is an important pillar of Japan's nuclear program.

The Nagoya-based utility postponed the project after the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant broke out following the massive earthquake and tsunami in March and then shut down the Hamaoka plant at the government's request.

Shikoku Electric, serving the Shikoku main island in southwestern Japan, also said Friday it was asked by the nuclear safety agency to solicit participants for a symposium in 2006 on a pluthermal

project of the Ikata nuclear power plant in Ehime Prefecture.

It also asked its employees to voice opinions and pose questions which had been prepared by the company beforehand.

Kyushu Electric also said it had made similar requests to participants it had solicited to make supportive comments at a symposium concerning the pluthermal project for its Genkai nuclear power plant in Saga Prefecture in 2005.

Chugoku Electric Power Co., whose service area is the Chugoku region in western Japan, also admitted that about half the attendants of a state-sponsored meeting in 2008 to explain to local residents about the pluthermal project for the Shimane nuclear power plant in Shimane Prefecture were related to the company and that the utility asked residents cooperative to the utility to voice opinions.

Tokyo Electric Power Co. serving eastern Japan said the utility asked its employees and workers of affiliated companies to attend government-sponsored events on the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant in Niigata Prefecture from fiscal 2007 to 2010, but denied it tried to manipulate participants' opinions.

Tohoku Electric Power Co. also made similar requests to its employees and affiliate firms' workers to attend a state-organized symposium held last year in Miyagi Prefecture concerning the pluthermal project. It also denied that it instructed the participants to make comments in favor of the project.

Hiroaki Koide, assistant professor at the Kyoto University Research Reactor Institute, said Japan's nuclear power policy has long been promoted together by the government, local municipalities and electricity firms.

"The problem that surfaced this time is just the tip of the iceberg," he said.

Kyushu Electric has admitted that a total of 141 people, including 45 of its employees, sent comments to a government-sponsored television program, aired June 26, via e-mail and fax amid a secret campaign to boost support for the company's plan to reactivate its nuclear reactors.

Kyodo, July 30, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/07/30/20110730p2g00m0dm013000c.html>

Revelations about staging illustrate collusive ties between gov't and power companies

Two electric power companies' revelations that the government's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) asked them to stage questions in symposia on nuclear energy policy have demonstrated the collusive relationship between NISA and the nuclear power industry.

Power suppliers and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), NISA's parent body, have until now both said their briefing sessions and symposia on nuclear power policy for the public have been held in a fair and just manner. They never breathed a word about insiders being sent to fill seats or pose questions that were neutral or in favor of nuclear power generation.

It makes the revelations that NISA, which is supposed to strictly regulate nuclear power generation for safety reasons, may have actively promoting nuclear power all the more shocking.

“The public’s confidence in us has been badly damaged. It’s a fateful crisis for not only NISA but the ministry as a whole,” says a high-ranking METI official.

METI’s influence on overall energy policy has declined considerably since the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant crisis began in March, with Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s announcement that Japan should eliminate its dependency on nuclear power plants. The administration even made Chubu Electric Power Co. stop operations at Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant in Shizuoka Prefecture, and a restart to other power plants is being delayed. According to an industry insider, the power industry is fed up with METI’s inability to stand up for them against the government.

Furthermore, industry sources believe that the two power suppliers — Chubu and Shikoku electric power — felt forced to reveal that NISA had asked them to stage symposia. They have faced in-house investigations after the recent scandal in which Kyushu Electric Power Co. attempted to manipulate public opinion in favor of a restart of their Genkai Nuclear Power Plant, and insiders say the power companies felt that if they were to release false reports and try to cover for NISA now, they could be exposed down the road and take a fatal blow.

“We can’t make any foolish cover ups of information,” said to an official with an electric power company in western Japan.

Critics have pointed out that it is unreasonable for the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy that promotes nuclear energy policy and NISA, which is to regulate nuclear power stations, to coexist under the umbrella of METI.

Following the Fukushima nuclear crisis, the government decided to split NISA from METI and merge it with the Cabinet Office’s Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan, and the latest revelations have certainly dealt a further blow to NISA.

The public’s distrust in the government’s nuclear power policy is only growing, and this new scandal will surely affect the issue of resuming operations at nuclear power plants suspended for regular safety inspections.

Seiya Tateyama, Mainichi Shimbun, July 30, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/07/30/20110730p2a00m0na013000c.html>

Nuclear regulator scandal may further delay restart of idled reactors

The accusations of attempts by the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) to manipulate public opinion to favor “pluthermal” nuclear projects at government-sponsored symposiums held in 2006 and 2007 have further dented public confidence in Japan’ nuclear policy and may further delay the restart of idled nuclear reactors across the country.

They also show the problem with NISA, a nuclear regulatory body existing under the Economy,

Trade and Industry Ministry, which has been keen to pursue and promote nuclear power generation.

One symposium in question was held at Omaezaki's Civil Hall in Shizuoka Prefecture on August 26, 2007 in which 524 people took part and 12 spoke. The symposium dealt with a "pluthermal" nuclear project for Chubu Electric Power Co. (CEPC). No one from the utility or its partner companies was among the people who presented their opinion, and none of the speakers spoke in favor of the project. Rather, they said things like "Pluthermal technology is still immature." Behind the scenes, however, there is said to have been a request from NISA to stage the comments.

While disclosing the fact that there were "staged questions" prepared for the symposium, Shuichi Terada, head of the legal affairs department at the Chubu Electric headquarters, told a news conference on July 29, "I can't tell you the name and the position (of the person who made the request)."

A third-party panel is set to investigate the NISA's alleged involvement in the scandal. But according to Chubu Electric, the group head of the company's nuclear power department received a verbal request in late July 2007 — one month before the symposium — to invite enough people to take part in the symposium to avoid vacant seats and to prepare questions to be raised by "local residents" in order to prevent opponents to the plan from asking all the questions.

The group head prepared questions both from affirmative and neutral positions, but senior company officials including a board member concluded that the questions were "problematic in terms of compliance (with corporate responsibility)." The utility firm verbally conveyed its decision to refuse to stage the event to NISA in early August 2007. For its part, NISA tacitly accepted the refusal, saying, "As the government, we cannot say anything more." These events were not reported to the company president and other board members.

Chubu Electric President Akihisa Mizuno told a news conference on July 29, "We have merely reported the facts." He strongly denied that his company has made the revelations in retaliation against the government for stopping the restart of reactors at the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant. But senior company officials appear to be deeply frustrated with the government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan since the Hamaoka plant was shut down in May at his request.

Local residents in Omaezaki, which hosts the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant, are losing trust in the government. Omaezaki mayor Shigeo Ishihara said, "I feel disgusted. NISA should straighten up."

On July 4, 2007 — before the symposium was held — the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry gave permission to the utility firm to start pluthermal power generation at its No. 4 reactor at the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant. But on July 16, the Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake struck, causing damage to the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Plant, run by Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), and sparking public fear over the safety of nuclear reactors in the event of a major earthquake. The symposium came into the spotlight because the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant sits right above the focal area of a possible major earthquake.

Pluthermal power generation, which uses plutonium and uranium mixed fuel in a normal reactor, is a main pillar of the nuclear program pursued by resource-poor Japan. Pluthermal power generation was first introduced at the No. 3 reactor at the Genkai Nuclear Power Plant operated by Kyushu Electric Power Co. in 2009. It was later introduced at nuclear power plants operated by Shikoku Electric Power Co. (SEPCO), TEPCO, and Kansai Electric Power Co. (KEPCO). The No. 3 reactor at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Plant, which was damaged by a hydrogen explosion, also used the fuel. The pluthermal project at the No. 4 reactor at the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant has been delayed, due partly to problems occurring with pluthermal generation at nuclear plants around the country.

Mainichi Shimbun , July 30, 2011

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/07/30/20110730p2a00m0na012000c.html>

Symposium fiasco forces reclusive NISA chief to surface

After being harshly criticized for failing to appear before the media to explain an attempt to manipulate a 2007 “pluthermal” symposium, Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency Director General Nobuaki Terasaka held a hastily arranged news conference Friday night.

It was Terasaka’s first news conference since March 12.

NISA found itself embroiled in scandal Friday after Chubu Electric Power Co. reported the agency had asked it to plant supportive or neutral questions among audience members at the symposium, which concerned the utility’s pluthermal plans for the Hamaoka nuclear plant. The matter is expected to hugely dent trust in the nuclear watchdog.

During a news conference NISA held earlier in the evening, many reporters demanded to know why Terasaka was not appearing before the media himself to offer an explanation.

“Nuclear Safety Commission head (Haruki) Madarame holds a news conference twice a week. The chairman and president of Tokyo Electric Power Co. also speak in front of the media at important events. And Prime Minister (Naoto) Kan also does,” one reporter said.

“Why is it only the NISA director general who hasn’t (faced the media) after the March disasters? Is there something special about NISA?” he asked.

By KAZUAKI NAGATA, *Japan Times* Staff writer, July 30, 2011

<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110730b1.html>
