

Few believe assertion that Fukushima crisis is over

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In a rush to fulfill a pledge to the international community to bring the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant under control, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda may have jumped the gun in his announcement on Dec. 16 declaring the crisis is over.

Noda's declaration has been met with skepticism both in Fukushima Prefecture and abroad, with even some members of his own ruling Democratic Party of Japan criticizing it as "fiction."

Noda's promise at an international conference, shortly after becoming prime minister in September, to bring the Fukushima nuclear accident under control before the end of the year was meant to respond to sustained mistrust of the Japanese government's handling of the situation.

Government orders to stop shipment of produce due to radiation contamination led to negative publicity abroad about Japanese food products.

A total of 44 nations and regions have restricted the imports of Japanese agricultural products and in the extreme case of Kuwait, all food products from every prefecture in Japan has been banned for import.

The negative publicity has also led to a sharp drop in the number of foreign tourists to Japan. In November, there were about 552,000 visitors, a decrease of 13.1 percent compared with November 2010.

Despite doubts even among DPJ lawmakers about whether the situation at the Fukushima plant could be described as being under control, a member of Noda's Cabinet said, "Unless the accident is brought under control, Japan will continue to lose the trust of the world."

Ironically, the initial response from abroad was not encouraging for Noda.

The *New York Times* said in an article on its website, "for many of the people of Fukushima, the crisis is far from over."

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote, "(the) authorities aren't even sure how to start tackling some of the biggest problems, which include locating and stopping the flow of toxic water and removing the melted nuclear fuel."

Meanwhile, experts in Japan were also raising doubts about the significance of Noda's announcement.

Fumiya Tanabe, who now heads a research institute dealing with social technology and system safety, was once a researcher at what was then the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute.

"Under the current situation, the most appropriate description would be 'stable cooling is being carried out at present,'" Tanabe said.

Even the government's Nuclear Safety Commission raised doubts about the prime minister's choice of words.

Haruki Madarame, the commission chairman, said on Dec. 12, "The commission has never used the term 'state of cold shutdown' (in relation to the Fukushima accident)."

One reason the term cold shutdown has almost taken on a life of its own was the initial explanations by the central government and Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, to try to bring the accident under control while never admitting that a core meltdown had occurred.

Even after a road map for dealing with the accident was compiled, no admission was made that nuclear fuel rods likely had melted in the reactor cores. The road map stated goals of achieving stable cooling of the reactors by July and a state of cold shutdown by the end of Step 2 of the process without clearly defining what those terms meant.

A definition of cold shutdown was finally made in July after the government admitted that nuclear fuel may have melted and leaked out of the core pressure vessel.

Such technicalities have not appeased the mayors and residents of Fukushima Prefecture who must still deal with life as evacuees amid uncertainty about when they can return to their homes.

"Even if they said cold shutdown, I would not be able to easily believe them," said Namie Mayor Tamotsu Baba.

All 20,000 Namie residents have been ordered to evacuate.

While Baba did say that completing Step 2 would reassure residents, he could not hide his accumulated distrust of the central government and TEPCO.

"Has the spewing of radioactive materials really stopped?" he asked. "I hope there will be even more thorough information disclosure and transmission regarding the situation at the nuclear plant."

Minami-Soma Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai, who also has doubts, said, "Can the government truly say it has the reactor core and the fuel issue completely under control? They don't even have the technology yet to inspect inside the reactor core. I believe the announcement was premature."

The announcement also had little meaning for the 150,000 or so Fukushima residents who have evacuated to other locations.

"Even if the government states 'the nuclear accident is under control,' there will be no change in our day-to-day lives as evacuees," said Mayumi Shiga, a homemaker from Futaba.

Shiga now lives in temporary housing in Inawashiro, also in Fukushima Prefecture, with her son who is in his second year in junior high school and her mother-in-law. Due to work obligations, her older son lives in Tokyo while her husband is in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture.

Ken Otsuka, 61, a former town assembly member of Futaba, has evacuated to Yokohama with his wife and mother-in-law.

"They have not yet removed the melted fuel rods from the reactor and there is no end to damage from high levels of radiation," he said. "They should not say it is under control until they have resolved some of the fundamental problems."

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