

Japan: Tight-lipped Tepco lays bare exclusivity of press clubs

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It was a shocking revelation for a majority of the people in Japan, but maybe not so for major media organizations.

Tsunehisa Katsumata, chairman of Tokyo Electric Power Co., admitted in a news conference on March 30 that on the 11th, the day the twin disasters hit the Tohoku region and crippled Tepco's Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, he was traveling to Beijing with retired Japanese journalists, expenses for which were partially paid by the utility.

"We probably paid more than our share" of the travel fee, Katsumata said.

Internet reporter Ryusaku Tanaka was shouted down by other journalists as he tried to question the Tepco executive.

The incident laid bare the oft-assumed cozy relationship between Tepco and major Japanese media organizations - members of the exclusive "kisha" (press) club that critics claim are preventing reporters from asking the utility tough questions about the nuclear accident. Similar complicity has long been assumed at other press clubs attached to the nation's various bureaucratic bodies.

Freelance journalist Takashi Uesugi, a former reporter for *The New York Times* in Tokyo, said he was astonished that no one had asked Tepco about whether a plutonium leak from the stricken plant was detected until he raised the question on March 27.

Experts have warned that plutonium may have been released from the No. 3 reactor, where MOX fuel is stored, due to a hydrogen explosion on March, 14 in addition to radioactive iodine and cesium. MOX fuel is a mix of uranium and plutonium oxide.

"For two weeks, not one reporter asked about plutonium in the press conference," said Uesugi. "When I raised the question, Tepco said it didn't have a detector to check it."

A day after the unthinkable revelation, Tepco announced it detected a small amount of plutonium from the soil on the plant's premises after it sent soil samples to an outside organization for analysis a week earlier.

"Press club members don't want to damage the cozy relationship with Tepco," Uesugi said. "This kind of mind-set makes them become soft on Tepco unwittingly."

A strong advocate of abolishing *kisha* clubs nationwide, Uesugi is one of the 22 members who founded the nonprofit organization Free Press Association of Japan in January aimed at pushing the clubs to allow nonmembers to attend news conferences.

Kisha clubs are mainly attached to government ministries and industries, and their members generally belong to major newspapers, broadcasters and wire services.

In many cases, however, their membership is limited to major domestic news organizations, triggering criticism for screening out foreign press, magazine reporters and freelance journalists.

But since March 11, the exclusive clubs have been forced to open up to nonmembers.

Nonmembers have only been allowed to attend the press conferences held by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano once a week even after March 11.

But feeling the need to allow as many media as possible amid the disaster, the *kisha* club covering Edano allowed an Internet media organization to broadcast his news conference live from March 17, albeit on a temporary basis.

Still, the exclusivity of the clubs is notorious among foreign reporters in Japan.

David McNeill, a Tokyo correspondent for the *Independent*, recalled how nonpress club reporters were shut out when the Tokyo Detention House opened its execution chamber for the first time to the media last August.

Despite numerous inquiries with the Justice Ministry, which oversees the detention house, ministry officials as well as its *kisha* club claimed the date was not set yet, and went ahead with the press tour without informing the foreign press, magazines and freelance journalists, he said.

McNeill later learned the *kisha* club members were told by the ministry to keep the tour date secret to nonmembers. "It's a symbiotic relationship," said McNeill.

The Justice Ministry was able to control the information to a large extent by allowing only members of the press club onto the tour, just as *kisha* club journalists are granted information nonmembers don't have, he said.

But it is not the nonmember journalists losing out in this game, he said.

"The losers are ordinary Japanese people because they don't hear all the information that they need to make rational political choices," McNeill said.

He indicated that the reason the support rate for the death penalty is unusually high in Japan may be because people are not well informed about what goes on in the chamber, including the fact that people in wheelchairs are executed or that prisoners on death row wait decades not knowing when the execution will take place.

"So you wonder, would it be as high if ordinary people knew everything about what goes on in the system," McNeill said.

Though often a target of criticism, the *kisha* club system has played a key role in forcing the government and authorities to disclose information to the public, supporters claim.

Formed in 1890, it started out with a small number of reporters who formed a group demanding the Imperial Diet to allow them to sit in on sessions.

Since then, *kisha* clubs have become key channels for media organizations in making collective demands against the authorities and vice versa.

Nobuaki Hanaoka, former head of the daily Sankei Shimbun's politics division and a *kisha* club advocate, claims magazine and freelance journalists are more focused on getting flashy quotes in

news conferences that may interfere with the reporting of newspapers and other press club members.

“When you report on politics, it’s not like there is a press officer in the Diet telling you what would happen. Nearly 100 reporters gather information day and night and write stories on what is likely to happen,” Hanaoka said.

“But if magazine and freelance reporters start firing (hostile) questions at press conferences without that kind of background information, politicians may simply clam up,” he said. “Political stories are not written only through information we get from press conferences.”

The situation, however, changed drastically after the Democratic Party of Japan, which promised to open up news conferences to nonmembers of kisha clubs, ousted the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party in September 2009.

To keep the promise they made during the campaign, newly appointed ministers of the DPJ-led government started to open up news conference to nonpress club members as well.

But video journalist Tetsuo Jimbo, one of the founding members of the FPAJ, said the organization was established to make sure the DPJ’s move of opening up press conferences will not threaten the basic premise that the media should hold the news conferences.

If authorities host press conferences, there is always a risk that those in power will try to manipulate information, including ending news conferences whenever they wish.

Because press clubs were reluctant to allow nonmembers to attend news conferences, the DPJ-led government must have thought it would be quicker and easier if the government hosted the news conferences instead of press clubs, he said.

“We had to create a cross-sectional organization of journalists that can host press conferences,” Jimbo said.

Thanks to the DPJ, some kisha clubs have opened up to nonmembers. But Jimbo claims his fight is not over until nonmembers have equal rights, including the number of people allowed in venues, and have a say in how press conferences proceed.

Still, critics agree the DPJ’s push to pressure the press clubs to open up the news conference was a big first step.

McNeill of the *Independent* vividly remembers when then Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada held the first news conference open to all members of the media, including nonpress club members, in September 2009.

“That was one of the most interesting press conferences I’ve ever been to in Japan,” he said.

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P.S.

* Japan Times, Tuesday, May 3, 2011:

<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110503f1.html>