

Fukushima one year on: Tracing the causes of the nuclear disaster

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It has been nearly a year since the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami triggered the triple meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. How did this man-made disaster happen?

The government Investigation Committee on the Accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Stations stated in a midterm report released in December last year that, first and foremost, the actions taken to protect the reactors from danger were not appropriate.

For instance, in the opening hours of the crisis, the report claims that Fukushima No. 1 plant manager Masao Yoshida and his staff failed to properly grasp the condition of one emergency cooling system called an isolation condenser (IC). The report furthermore pointed to the clumsy handling of water injections into the No. 3 reactor. The cores in both these reactors melted down, and both reactor buildings were blown apart by hydrogen explosions — No. 1 on March 12, 2011, and No. 3 on March 14.

“March 11, 4:42 p.m.: Water level in No.1 reactor dropping,” reads the plant event log on the day the disaster began. “Same day, 5:50 p.m.: Radiation rising around No. 1 reactor building.”

After the No. 1 reactor lost power, it is possible an IC system valve was stuck closed, and there were plenty of signs that it was not working properly. Both staff on site and the headquarters of plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), however, believed the valve was functioning until 11:50 p.m. This misinterpretation was at least partially responsible for the dispatch of firefighters to pump water into the reactors from outside, and the late venting of gas building up inside the reactor structures.

But why didn't the TEPCO workers understand that the IC valve in the No. 1 reactor was shut?

First of all, the reactor operators had never been trained how to open and close IC valves, and didn't have the necessary skills. TEPCO headquarters in Tokyo, too, could not contribute any helpful direction.

“If the situation had been evaluated correctly, then there should have been no misapprehensions regarding the state of the IC valve,” the investigative committee report stated. TEPCO's workers, however, did not have enough training to deal with the realities of the growing disaster.

At the No. 3 reactor, at 2:42 a.m. on March 13, one of the reactor operators stopped the reactor's high pressure coolant injection system (HPCI), which had been pumping water into the core, to switch over to another injection method. That second method, however, failed.

The midterm report stated that partly due to poor communication, Yoshida and other senior managers at the plant didn't find out that the HPCI system had even been stopped for about an hour. Staff took countermeasures, but they were already behind the curve and the crisis grew that much worse.

“It cannot be said for certain that the hydrogen explosions could have been averted had the alternate water injection methods gone well,” the report says of the No. 1 and 3 reactors, “but it is possible that damage to the reactors could have been retarded, the amount of radioactive material emitted constrained, and later operations made easier.”

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/03/01/20120301p2a00m0na011000c.html>

Mass media under scrutiny on 1st anniversary of 3/11 disasters

Domestic and foreign mass media are under close scrutiny as Japan prepares to mark the first anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami and subsequent crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

Professors of journalism and media experts took the podium at the Japan National Press Club on March 1 to report their initial findings on how Japanese and foreign newspapers, TV networks and, to a lesser extent, social media like Twitter performed as the March 2011 disasters — including the worst nuclear crisis since the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown — unfolded.

Shuzo Yamakoshi, assistant professor of journalism at Keio University, and Masayuki Karasudani, assistant professor at Musashino University, traced how the Japanese media have covered nuclear power in Fukushima Prefecture since the 1970s, when pro-nuclear power sentiment of the 1950s and '60s changed to a “yes, but” mood against nuclear power plants.

Masaya Hayakawa, chief editor of Fukushima-Minpo Co., told Karasudani in an interview in November last year that readers of the prefecture’s largest newspaper are having increasingly negative reactions to nuclear disaster stories. “They want stories to buoy their spirits, while also battling a sense of crisis that the nuclear issue may become a minor one limited to Fukushima,” Karasudani said, summing up the interview with Hayakawa.

The event at the Japan National Press Club drew about 180 people and was organized by the nonprofit Japan Press Research Institute, which commissioned media studies by the Yamakoshi-Karasudani duo and five other teams.

Shinji Oi, professor of journalism at Nihon University, assistant Takeshi Miyawaki, and their team polled nearly 1,000 residents of Tokyo’s Ota Ward to evaluate the media’s performance. The survey, with a valid response rate of 40.3 percent, found respondents to be generally positive about reporting by newspapers and TV stations. But Miyawaki said some residents faulted them for not presenting the whole picture and not properly dealing with the issue of harmful rumors.

Tokai University professor Takayoshi Kawai and Hiroyuki Fujii of NTT Resonant and Gakushuin University found that five national dailies — Yomiuri, Asahi, Mainichi, Sankei and Nikkei — as well as three prefectural and regional dailies — Iwate Nippo, Kahoku Shimpō and Fukushima-Minpo — were using social media, although their methods varied. At the Sendai-based Kahoku Shimpō, advertisement section personnel are riding bicycles around the prefectural capital to keep tabs on developments as part of the paper’s twitter campaign.

A team from Sophia University led by professor Yuga Suzuki checked how seven leading newspapers in Japan, South Korea, China and Taiwan such as the Yomiuri, JoongAng Ilbo and People's Daily covered the triple disasters, with emphasis on the Fukushima nuclear disaster. While the South Korean and Taiwanese dailies hailed non-sensational Japanese media coverage — citing public broadcaster NHK as one example — South Korean and Chinese dailies polled were critical of the Japanese government's handling of the crisis.

Piya Pongsapitaksanti, lecturer at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Nagasaki, conducted a comprehensive survey of TV programs, articles and photos in his native Thailand over a roughly four-month period from March 11 to June 30. Thai newspapers relied heavily on western news agencies such as AFP and Reuters, but Thai TV networks frequently cited Japanese counterparts such as NHK.

"These reports," the Thai scholar says, "reflect friendly relations between Thailand and Japan as exemplified by 'A friend in need is a friend indeed.'"

Chikako Oshima, professor of marketing communications at Tsukuba Gakuin University, citing her experience as a former public relations chief for Lufthansa German Airlines in Japan and South Korea, urged the Japanese government to take the initiative in preventing harmful rumors through a strategic PR campaign. She told the audience about one incident in which a European firm asked a Japanese embassy about radiation levels, only to be told to check Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry data for itself.

The final reports by these journalism professors and researchers will be submitted this summer before being published in book form.

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2012/03/02/20120302p2a00m0na013000c.html>
