Unsung: Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda listens Sunday to one of the "Fukushima 50" workers who stayed at Fukushima No. 1 at the height of the March 2011 crisis, in Futaba, Fukushima Prefecture. The man did not want to be identified. KYODO

"Fukushima 50' recount quiet heroism

By REIJI YOSHIDA
Staff writer

NARAH, Fukushima Pref. — Some of the "Fukushima 50" — the dozens of workers who stayed at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant at the height of the nuclear crisis in March last year — spoke out for the first time in a public event Sunday, meeting Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda during his visit to the still-troubled plant and related facilities.

Overseas media praised the "50" — the actual number is unknown but fluctuated as the crisis wore on — as dedicated heroes who braved three core meltdowns and three hydrogen explosions as they struggled to save Japan from a true nuclear catastrophe.

Their demeanor Sunday, however, was far from swaggering and at the start of their meeting with the prime minister they even apologized to the public.

The workers have drawn much admiration from the public, as seen in the multitude of letters and banners from children pinned on a wall in J. Village, the sports facility that has served as the base camp for about 3,000 people laboring at Fukushima No. 1.

Many of the children’s messages thank them for "working for Japan" and stopping the meltdown crisis from spiraling out of control.

But on Sunday, each of the eight representatives calmly described their desperate efforts during the height of the emergency, and some repeated their apology to people who suffered fear because of the nuclear crisis.

"From the bottom of our heart, we’d like to apologize for causing (serious)
Six of the eight men declined to be identified by the media. These six are still working at Fukushima No. 1, taking part in the effort to decommission the damaged reactors and related facilities.

The scariest moment for one of the six, who was struggling to repair the critical power equipment needed to cool the reactors, was when a hydrogen explosion in the building housing reactor 3 ripped apart the entire top floor.

He had assigned his staff to work near the building. Later, he learned that a car they had driven there was flattened by debris from the blast.

"The staff had a narrow escape," he said. "Tears welled up in my eyes when I finally made contact with them."

Masatoshi Fukura, then the operation chief of reactors 1 through 4, said about 40 key personnel stayed in the two central control rooms during the first 48 hours of the crisis.

With the power supply completely cut off, the workers struggled in darkness to revive critical instruments to find out what was happening in the out-of-control reactors.

"When the (hydrogen) explosion occurred at reactor No. 1, (workers in the control rooms) felt as if strong jolts were knocking up through the floor. All the veneer fell from the ceiling, and rooms were all covered with white dust," Fukura said.

Breathing in dust contaminated with radioactive materials is extremely dangerous, so the workers were forced to wear full face masks with filters at all times throughout the crisis, even though it made breathing difficult.

"The situation was very severe," Fukura said.

According to Yoshizawa, more than 6,000 workers were on duty when the monster earthquake first shook the plant. The vast majority evacuated.

"First, I worried if (those 6,000) people could evacuate safely. Tsunami eventually came less than one hour after the earthquake, but even in normal times" it takes 20 to 40 minutes for everyone simply to get out of the plant's compound, Yoshizawa said.

The most agonizing experience for another of the six who declined to be identified was trying to persuade his staff to go outside to repair the damaged power equipment in the dead of night.

"We knew the reactors were unstable. . . . But the night was dark, and they could have been electrocuted. There was no means of communications" such as cellphones, he said.

"My staff were too scared to go. They asked me sternly, 'Will we be able to return safely if we go out now?' " the man recalled.

One of the representatives headed a firefighter squad at Fukushima No. 1.

"I was injured by the (hydrogen) explosion at reactor No. 1," he said. "All of the glass windows in our fire engine were shattered, and debris hit my hand and broke the bones."

He was sent away from the facility for treatment. He said he still feels guilty about leaving his fellow firefighters, who struggled on for weeks.

"I was the head of the squad," he said. "Everyone else had a really hard time."

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