

GOVERNMENT PROBE: Many Fukushima hospital patients died during botched rescue operation

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A day after the Tohoku earthquake hit, the Futaba Hospital director ordered 209 patients and all doctors and nurses to flee to safety as the disaster started unfolding at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

The director, Ichiro Suzuki, 77, remained behind with about 130 patients.

“I sent off all the hospital staff because I believed that SDF troops and police would arrive at any minute to rescue us,” Suzuki recalled.

But by the time the Self-Defense Forces arrived, two days had passed, the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant had become a crisis and four of the patients were dead.

In all, 19 patients died during the five days it took to complete the evacuation of Futaba Hospital. Many were stranded at the hospital--some of them twice--while others could not survive the long journeys to evacuation centers.

The SDF rescue operation ran into problem after problem due to an often appalling lack of communication and errors in logistics, according to the final report of the central government’s Investigation Committee on the Accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Stations.

“Those in charge of a lifesaving mission should have handled their task with a stronger sense of responsibility,” the report, released on July 23, said.

On March 12, 2011, a day after the magnitude-9.0 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami knocked out power at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, the central government issued an evacuation order for people living within 10 kilometers of the plant.

At that time, about 340 patients were at Futaba Hospital in Okuma, 4.6 km southwest of the plant.

Suzuki said the first batch of 209 patients left the hospital in five large buses with doctors and nurses, followed shortly thereafter by the remaining hospital staff.

An SDF unit based in Koriyama in Fukushima Prefecture headed to the zone on the afternoon of March 12 to assist in the evacuation.

But the SDF members could not locate the emergency control center in Okuma, where central government and local officials were supposed to organize a recovery response, because of the SDF’s inadequate communication system, the central government’s panel said.

The troops could not communicate with SDF headquarters because they were not equipped with a wireless relay network, according to sources close to the SDF.

While the Futaba Hospital patients were waiting to be rescued, a hydrogen explosion rocked the No. 1 reactor building of the plant at 3:36 p.m. on March 12.

Suzuki continued to not only tend to the needs of the 130 Futaba Hospital patients, but he also helped to take care of 98 residents of an affiliated nursing home 350 meters away with the chief of the home and other staff members.

“There was no power and the telephone lines were dead,” Suzuki recalled. “The temperature was near freezing late at night.”

The hospital patients survived on snacks and received intravenous fluids about a day longer than usual because nurses had slowed down the IVs before they evacuated.

But many of the patients were already in serious condition. Some had dementia, others were bed-ridden. Some of the patients stranded at the hospital were suffering from terminal cancer.

Four of the patients died on the night of March 13 or in the early hours of March 14. An SDF unit based in Gunma Prefecture, southwest of Fukushima Prefecture, arrived at Futaba Hospital on the morning of March 14.

“Some patients would have survived if they had been rescued sooner,” a hospital staff member said.

But the “rescue” continued to experience problems.

The Gunma SDF unit took the 98 nursing-home residents and 34 hospital patients to the Soso public health center in Minami-Soma, north of the nuclear plant. Center officials then asked the troops to take the elderly residents and patients to Iwaki, a city in the south of the prefecture.

The evacuees arrived at Iwaki Koyo Senior High School, which had been turned into an evacuation center, around 8 p.m. the same day. The coastal area had been destroyed by the tsunami, so the SDF took an inland route.

The trip from Minami-Soma to Iwaki lasted for five hours. Eight patients and six residents died on the journey.

Such a long trip was unnecessary, according to the panel’s report. Officials of the Fukushima prefectural government’s welfare section had made arrangements for four hospitals to accept 82 evacuees.

But the SDF members were never informed, and continued on their way to Iwaki.

In fact, the welfare section did not even notify the prefecture’s disaster response task force about the hospital arrangements, the panel’s report said.

The officials at the welfare section may have forgotten to report the arrangements to their colleagues on the following shift, according to sources in the prefectural government.

Blunders were also apparent after the SDF reached the remaining 90 patients at Futaba Hospital.

Troops stationed in Sendai, the capital of neighboring Miyagi Prefecture, arrived at the hospital early on March 15.

After the Sendai SDF unit left with 47 patients, the Gunma unit returned to the hospital and took away seven additional patients.

Staff members at the emergency response center in Okuma who oversaw the rescue of the patients by the Sendai unit had left the hospital before the Gunma troops arrived. They failed to inform the SDF about the number of patients who remained.

After the Gunma unit left, 35 patients were left isolated in the annex hospital building.

The Gunma troops returned on March 16 to rescue the remaining 35 patients. Seven of the patients died on the previous day and on the day of the final evacuation of the hospital.

According to Futaba Hospital, 40 of the original 340 patients had died by the end of March last year. The number of deaths of residents at the nursing home was 10 over the same period.

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