

INSIDE FUKUSHIMA: How workers tried but failed to avert a nuclear disaster

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YOSHIDA OVERBURDENED

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Yoshida, general manager of the Fukushima No. 1 plant, was dogged by an incessant stream of questions and instructions from TEPCO headquarters. Even though his position required him to make crucial decisions, of which there were too many, he was being forced to handle tasks that were outside his responsibility.

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At 11:10 p.m. on March 12, TEPCO official Takahashi instructed the headquarters as well as the Fukushima No. 1 and No. 2 plants to submit their night-shift plans.

After some silence, Yoshida replied, "I'm a bit too beat to prepare them now."

Earlier that day, a hydrogen explosion had occurred at the No. 1 reactor building, and the plant had been like a battlefield as frantic efforts continued into the night to pump seawater into the reactor.

But Takahashi persisted. "You don't have to prepare anything elaborate. All I need are some phone numbers we can call. Why, even just your phone number would do."

"Well then, I'll think of what I can do," Yoshida replied.

A minute later he started sounding off.

"Listen. The 1F is in the 20-kilometer evacuation zone, and so probably is the 2F. That means none of our workers can go home anyway. It's just a question of whether they are awake or asleep. I'll give you the phone numbers of those who are relatively likely to be awake, so you can call them if you really need to. But I'm telling you, this is pretty much the situation here now."

At TEPCO headquarters, all workers except a handful had been permitted to go home. Nobody answered Yoshida.

'IT VENTED BECAUSE IT VENTED'

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TEPCO headquarters was receiving demands and questions from the prime minister's office and the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency. But instead of handling them itself, the headquarters dumped most of them on Yoshida. And since many were made without consideration of the actual situation at the Fukushima No. 1 plant, fielding them sapped Yoshida's time and energy.

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At 6:45 a.m. on March 13, preparations were under way at the Fukushima No. 1 plant to pump seawater into the No. 3 reactor. "Isn't your decision to pump seawater a bit too hasty?" questioned the prime minister's office.

Yoshida told the teleconference: "The point raised is that since the use of seawater is tantamount to scrapping the reactor, we should consider

doing anything we can to use fresh water or filtered water instead."

"But we haven't got any fresh water," someone at the Fukushima No. 1 plant said.

TEPCO headquarters remained silent.

An employee at the plant said: "Per your instruction, we will start pumping filtered water wherever we can. But this will delay the start of the pumping work."

The process of switching from seawater to filtered water took half an hour or so.

Yoshida also bore the brunt of demands by the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, as TEPCO headquarters repeatedly dumped the agency's orders and questions on him.

"The Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency wants to know about our decisions on venting," the headquarters said. "Specifically, the question is why we decided that the reactor had been vented successfully."

An exasperated Yoshida replied: "Venting occurred simply because the rupture disc (a safety valve that opens when the containment vessel's internal pressure rises) opened."

Workers at the plant were busy checking rises in radiation levels in the atmosphere after the venting, and, thanks to the venting, were preparing to pump water into the No. 3 reactor. They simply had no time to answer inane questions.

'QUIT PESTERING US!'

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At 2 p.m. on March 14, TEPCO headquarters tried to discuss with Yoshida a plan of action based on flimsy assumptions. Yoshida exploded with anger: "Hold it. Just hold it. Stop talking so irresponsibly!"

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It was feared that the hydrogen explosion at the No. 3 reactor building could have damaged the fire hose for pumping water into the No. 2 reactor. Nevertheless, a worker at TEPCO headquarters declared that preparations to pump seawater into the No. 2 reactor were "complete."

This infuriated Yoshida. "Our on-site people are still checking (to see if the hose is usable), and we have not heard from them yet. Things are not all well and fine here, and I just want you to stop saying that."

As feared, not only the hose but also the fire engine itself had been damaged beyond repair.

Overnight, the pressure inside the No. 2 reactor's pressure vessel rose sharply. More instructions from headquarters, which were already too numerous, kept flooding in.

When the orders began to focus on matters that had nothing to do with keeping the crippled reactors under control, like what to do about the delivery of light oil and generators, Yoshida hotly demanded that workers at the headquarters directly contact their counterparts at the plant.

At 10 p.m., headquarters asked him how much water was being pumped into each reactor.

Yoshida had had it. He yelled in fury: "We don't have any brainy people around here. You keep pestering us with random questions. Just don't expect us to give you the answers you want!"

(This article was written by Toshihiro Okuyama, Hideaki Kimura and Takashi Sugimoto.)

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