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Lacking facts, U.S. played it safe with 80-km evac zone

WASHINGTON (AP) A recommendation for the evacuation of all U.S. citizens who live within 80 km of the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant was based on incomplete information and assumptions about the reactors' condition, U.S. nuclear officials told an independent advisory panel Thursday.

Members of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards pressed officials Thursday to explain how they concluded that 80 km was a safe distance from the crippled reactors. Tokyo had set a 20-km evacuation zone.

On March 16, the Obama administration recommended that Americans evacuate from within an 80-km radius of the stricken nuclear plant, raising questions about U.S. officials' confidence in Tokyo's risk assessments.

Japan established the 20-km evacuation zone after March 11 and has said people living 20 km to 30 km from the plant should stay indoors.

Randy Sullivan, who leads a protective measures team, said no data from the site were used to determine the distance. Instead, he said, it was based on the potential conditions of the reactors.

Sullivan told the committee the calculation was based on "a big release," which U.S. officials could not confirm was happening. The scenario model assumed 100 percent fuel damage at reactor No. 2, leading to a radioactive release that would last 16 hours, Sullivan said.

Michael Corradini, chairman of the nuclear engineering program at the University of Wisconsin, said, "You were doing a what-if calculation."

Corradini continued: "Thirty-two years ago if Japan had done a what-if calculation about Three Mile Island and said all the Japanese living within 50 miles (80 km) of Harrisburg should get out, what would our response be to that?" He referred to the partial meltdown of a reactor in Pennsylvania in 1979.

William Ruland, director of the Division of Safety Systems within the NRC's Nuclear Reactor Regulation Office, said the 80-km evacuation recommendation will be evaluated. Actual measurements taken since the March 17 decision have confirmed, according to NRC, that the decision was prudent.

"We were trying to . . . protect our citizens or to make recommendations as appropriate based on the limited information we had," Ruland said. "Sometimes, during emergencies, you basically have to make a decision on the spot based on limited data. And sometimes you have to make a decision, and sometimes that is better than no decision."

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