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JUST BE CAUSE

Letting radiation leak, but never information

By **DEBITO ARUDOU**

March 2011 has shaken Japan to the core. The earthquake, tsunami and nuclear incident in Fukushima have given the world cause to pause and reflect on the fragility and hubris of human existence. My condolences to the victims, and their families and friends.

But it's time for some assessments, however premature.

First, some praise. I thought the government did a much better job than in the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake. Back then, several days passed before Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama and the military arrived on the scene, due to collapsed infrastructure and communication snafus. Yet while thousands of people lay dying in rubble, our government famously rejected aid from overseas. They refused provisions and medicine from nearby American aircraft carriers, even tying up Swiss sniffer dogs in quarantine. People died from the bureaucracy's belief that Japan was too rich and developed to need foreign help.

This time, however, Prime Minister Naoto Kan was on the scene with rescue teams almost immediately. Although Kan did resort to traditional rhetoric of "We Japanese saving ourselves" in his speeches (a callously ethnocentric way to ask Japan's residents to dig deep emotionally), overseas aid was accepted with fanfare and gratitude. I thought Kan did the best he could, given the information at the government's disposal.

But here endeth the praise. As Fukushima's nuclear reactors become Japan's perpetually burning tire-yard fire, they have laid bare the fundamental flaw of Japan's "nanny state": the assumption that "father knows best" and that the public are children incapable of dealing with potentially dangerous situations. The reflexive, obsessive control of information has done our people a great disservice.

Let's start with the Tokyo Electric Power Co. They kept us woefully underinformed (to put it mildly) about the stricken reactors. Some may say that leaking limited information is standard operating procedure for the nuclear industry worldwide (justified under "avoiding public panic"), but this was not mere lipstick on a wasteful political boondoggle — it was a potential China Syndrome (or would that be South Atlantic Syndrome in this case?). And since the fallout could not be contained domestically, the story came under more demanding global standards of scrutiny.

Tragically, Tepco kept such a tight lid on information that not only was our government kept in the dark, but so were worldwide nuclear experts. This caused burgeoning speculation, a slow-breeder panic and a media meltdown poisoned by gross mutations of logic.

The increasingly senile governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, called the disaster "divine intervention" for Japan's "egoism" (he later apologized; now let's have a public retraction of his 2000 speech claiming that heinous foreigners would riot during natural disasters like these). Governments began to disagree on the

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definition of "safe distance" from Fukushima, while Japan adjusted "safe levels of radiation exposure" to suit political expediency.

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While Japan's media cartels as usual skimmed on investigative journalism, overseas and online media, running on fumes, had no choice but to fill in the gaps. When some foreign reportage became sensationalist, proponents of nuclear power utilized it to sow doubt and dissent. Commentators were derided as fearmongers for presenting the heresy that nuclear power might not be so safe after all. Eventually, if the information had not been sourced from the nuclear industry itself, it was interpreted as suspicious, culturally insensitive, even anti-Japanese.

Criticism shifted from those who caused this incident to those who wanted to do something about it. People moving to a safer location were treated as deserters. The exasperated public began to tune out and adopt a sense of futility and fatalism, even as radiation levels rose and contaminated the food chain.

Fortunately, given time, all this should pass. But one lingering afterglow will be a feeling of betrayal of the public trust.

We were told that nuclear power was safe. One assumes, not unreasonably, that this means no leaks. Zero emissions. Hence, the public should have zero tolerance for any man-made radiation. We should reject ex post facto reassurances that this amount of millisieverts is insignificant, the same as an X-ray, an airplane flight, etc. Sometimes the government's advice was so unscientific that it tried the patience of an educated society. (In a land of poorly insulated housing, being told to "just stay indoors" is clearly stopgap.)

My point is that the public has been kept in the dark for generations about the risks of nuclear power, settling for cute cartoon characters that deliberately and persistently underinform us. Yet when the industry screws up, who takes the fallout?

Not Japan's nuclear firms. Tepco, remember, similarly botched things after radiation leaks at Tokai, Ibaraki Prefecture, in 1999 and the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture in 2007. Yet these Homer Simpsons remain in charge, despite, according to Wikileaks, repeated warnings from overseas specialists about their outmoded and lackluster safety standards (in a land of extreme seismic activity, no less). In a society that, if anything, overcompensates in the name of safety, why is nuclear energy such a glowing exception?

Nor will the government be held accountable, despite abetting coverups, preventing more leaks of information than of radiation, and rarely coming clean about nuclear power's dirty secrets. Part of it is due to the lack of class-action lawsuit mechanisms in Japan's judiciary, and the fact that judges almost never rule against the government.

But most of it is rooted in one simple historical fact: The state always wins in Japan. Because it always has.

This is a society, remember, that has never experienced a popular grassroots revolution in its history. The result is that less cultural value is placed on fairness and social justice, more on personal perseverance and knuckling under — even if that means the environment gets poisoned and people die, either as volunteer fire department heroes or as silent victims after long-term radiation exposure. Afterward, we'll salute and mourn those who sacrificed themselves for the system, feeling sad for them but grateful that it didn't happen to us. It's a cost of living in Japan.

One would hope that Fukushima would occasion review and reform. But I doubt it will. Fukushima has illuminated how the biggest problems facing Japan will not get fixed — because the public cannot or will not force the state to take responsibility for its mistakes. Ultimately, this is what breeds Japan's undying fatalism.

Debito Arudou's new novel "In Appropriate" is now on sale; see www.debito.org/inappropriate.html. Twitter @aroudodebito. Just Be Cause appears on the first Community Page of the month. Send comments on this issue to community@iapantimes.co.id

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