

No explosion at No. 2 reactor / TEPCO: Only 3 hydrogen blasts occurred at Fukushima N-plant

The Yomiuri Shimbun

The Tokyo Electric Power Co. panel investigating the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant has concluded that a hydrogen explosion did not occur at the plant's No. 2 reactor, overturning its previous conclusion that an explosion took place on March 15, according to a draft of the panel's interim report.

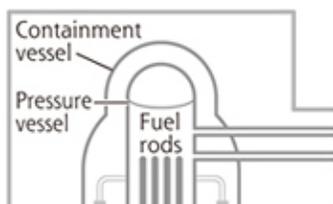
The panel, chaired by TEPCO Vice President Masao Yamazaki, devoted pages of the draft to defending the utility's handling of the crisis, such as saying that TEPCO could not reasonably have anticipated the size of tsunami before the disaster. The panel also said the company's slow initial response to the nuclear disaster could not be avoided.

TEPCO said it would publicly release the

Crisis time line for Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant's No. 2 reactor

Events specific to No. 2 reactor

March 11	2:46 p.m.	Great East Japan Earthquake
	3:27 p.m.	First tsunami hits power plant
March 13	10:15 a.m.	Plant Manager Masao Yoshida orders steam vented from reactor
March 14	1:25 p.m.	TEPCO discovers reactor's emergency core cooling system may have stopped
	7:54 p.m.	Fire trucks begin injecting water into reactor
	10:50 p.m.	Pressure in containment vessel's upper section surpasses limit
March 15	0:02 a.m.	Work to prepare for venting finishes, but a vent on the containment vessel closes unexpectedly several minutes after being opened
	6:12 a.m.	TEPCO confirms sound of huge explosion
	About 7 a.m.	About 650 TEPCO employees and others move to Fukushima No. 2 power plant, leaving about 70 workers at No. 1 plant



Changes in TEPCO's conclusion on No. 2 reactor troubles

Previous conclusion
Hydrogen explosion occurred

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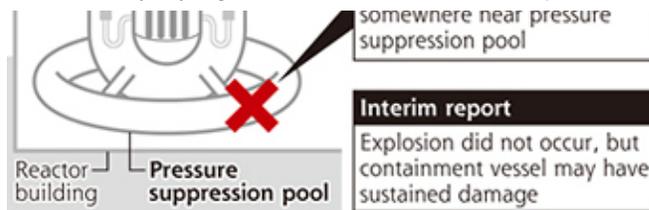
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interim report after submitting the draft to a third-party verification committee of experts.



According to TEPCO, the first hydrogen explosion took place in the No. 1 reactor building on the afternoon of March 12, followed by an explosion at the No. 3 reactor on the morning of March 14.

Early on the morning of March 15, TEPCO confirmed the sound of an explosion, and then found damage in the No. 4 reactor building.

The power company also confirmed that pressure in the No. 2 reactor's pressure suppression pool, which is the lower portion of the reactor's containment vessel, dropped significantly immediately after the sound was heard. So the company concluded that explosions must have occurred almost simultaneously at the Nos. 2 and 4 reactors, and the government reported the same conclusion to the International Atomic Energy Agency in June.

However, the panel studied a seismometer at the plant and found only one explosion tremor recorded at 6:12 a.m. that day. Based on analysis of the tremor, the panel concluded that the explosion occurred at the No. 4 reactor.

However, due to the fact that the pressure at the No. 2 reactor's pressure suppression pool dropped around that time, the panel said the reactor's containment vessel may have sustained other damage. The interim report did not further explain the damage or its cause.

Indeed, the core of the No. 2 reactor is believed to have sustained the most serious damage among the power plant's six reactors, and the pace of cooling at the No. 2 reactor has been slow.

On Wednesday, the temperature at the base of the No. 2 reactor fell below 100 C for the first time since the March 11 disaster, meeting one of the two conditions for the reactor to be declared in a stable cooling state known as cold shutdown. The temperatures of Nos. 1 and 3 reactors have already fallen below 100 C.

According to the draft of the interim report, a blowout panel installed at the upper part of the No. 2 reactor building opened accidentally after the No. 1 reactor's hydrogen explosion on March 12. The draft says a hydrogen explosion was avoided at the No. 2 reactor because a certain amount of hydrogen escaped through the blowout panel.

The interim report also referred to a possible reason why hydrogen explosions occurred at the Nos. 1 and 3 reactors. The report said silicon rubber used to seal the spaces between doors and wall, and between the containment vessels and their lids, may have not functioned properly due to the high temperatures, opening gaps that allowed the release of hydrogen into the reactor building.

The panel defended the company's slow initial response to the nuclear disaster, such as preparations to vent steam from reactor, by saying, "It can't be helped that that [the initial response] took time, as workers had to prepare in the darkness."

The interim report said the nuclear reactor's major equipment sustained no damage due to the earthquake itself, but instruments ensuring the safety of the nuclear reactors lost their functions simultaneously due to tsunami, worsening the situation exponentially.

TEPCO established the panel on June 11. The panel comprises eight senior TEPCO officials, including company executives and those equivalent to department chiefs. The power company plans to release the interim report in November at the earliest, after submitting the draft to the verification committee chaired by Genki Yagawa, a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo who specializes in nuclear structural engineering. Other than Yagawa, the committee has six members.

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Panel defends TEPCO

In the spring of 2008, TEPCO estimated that a 15.7-meter tsunami could hit the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in the future, which was about the size of the March 11 tsunami.

The utility came up with another estimate in December that year, modeled on the Jogan tsunami that hit northern Japan in 869. This estimate was 9.2 meters.

However, the draft of the interim report said TEPCO was justified in not utilizing the estimates to take measures against catastrophic tsunami. It said the estimates were "conceptual ones and were unsuitable to be used as bases for tsunami measurements."

The draft defended a 2002 estimate made by the Japan Society of Civil Engineers, which envisaged a 5.7-meter tsunami hitting the power plant. TEPCO adopted this estimate in taking measures against tsunami at the power plant.

The draft said this estimate was "based on the latest scientific findings, which have been recognized academically."

"It was impossible for TEPCO to estimate the size of the [March 11] tsunami," the draft concluded.

Former Prime Minister Naoto Kan visited the Fukushima No. 1 power plant for about an hour in the early morning of March 12 before TEPCO began venting steam from the reactors. Some opposition party members have criticized Kan for causing a delay in TEPCO's handling of the nuclear crisis.

The draft said, "There is no evidence that [Kan's] visit delayed the start of venting."

However, it did state: "Plant Manager [Masao] Yoshida briefed [Kan] on the emergency situation. A senior official stationed at the off-site [emergency response] center entered the nuclear plant to guide Kan around from the time of his arrival."

(Oct. 3, 2011)

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