

## EDITORIALS

## Nuclear power and press freedom

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Japan fell from 22nd place to 53rd in the rankings of press freedom last year, according to the nonprofit organization Reporters Without Borders. Japan's plummet was attributed to a single factor — the lack of access to information related to the disaster at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

In the past, Japan could be relatively proud of its reputation for press freedom compared with that of most countries. But being ranked lower lately than countries such as El Salvador or Haiti is an embarrassing reminder that press freedom can quickly erode under pressure from the government and corporations.

In reporting on the serious disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, many reporters have met with restricted access, lack of transparency and even lawsuits.

Though investigation reports were issued by the government, the Diet and a private-sector committee as well as by Tepco, a genuine account of the crisis has yet to be completed.

So far, no one has been charged with crimes related to the nuclear power plant disaster. However, better access to Tepco's records, as well as to what was known by affiliated companies and the government, is the first step to determine possible negligence, collusion or criminal responsibility.

For that process to be fair and thorough, independent verification, one of the most important duties of a free press, is essential. The public deserves to know what the records of Tepco and of the government might reveal.

Tepco has consistently barred access to documents and to people. When freelance and independent reporters were finally allowed into the plant, Tepco demanded final say over their video and images. That does not constitute press freedom.

An investigative reporter was sued by one of Tepco's subsidiaries to keep his reporting quiet. The corporation, which was one of Tepco's primary affiliates, apparently sought to silence the reporter. Freelance journalists and magazines were sued after publishing articles on the alleged collusion among politicians, nuclear plant construction companies and Tepco.

It must be concluded that the intent of taking reporters and publications to court is to cover up the truth.

Another issue with regard to press freedom in general is that freelance journalists are still not allowed full access to all official press club briefings. This antiquated *kisha* (reporters') club system has started to allow registered freelance journalists to attend Friday news conferences given by the chief Cabinet secretary at the prime minister's official residence. But this is still insufficient.

All journalists should have access to official information directly. Journalists covering protests against nuclear power should also be free from any restrictions.

The reporting on how companies, ministries and agencies and the government handled the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear plant stands as a test case for Japan's commitment to press freedom. The most serious crisis in modern Japan deserves increased reporting, not decreased transparency.

People deserve to know the facts from multiple sources. Open access to crucial information is the only real test of press freedom. That is especially true when the issue is of such vital, ongoing importance. The right of the public to hear from multiple sources means that independent reporting must continue without intimidation, limitation or smoke screens. Determining the causes of the disaster is a difficult, demanding process even with sufficient access. Much still remains unknown.

Other ensuing problems, such as high levels of radiation in the soil or the question of where waste from Fukushima will be handled also deserve clear, full reporting. The Nuclear Regulation Authority should not shroud its examination of the safety of nuclear power plants in secrecy.

Reporting on their safety should not be just a matter of citing press releases. For the sake of fair and independent reporting, it must be ensured that journalists can verify what the NRA and power companies say so that they can be sure that safety measures are being followed.

Japan's press freedom is different from that of other countries. Japan is unlike Russia, ranked 148th in press freedom, where investigative journalists have been jailed without trial. Japan is also very different from Pakistan, ranked 159th, where a young girl, Ms. Malala Yousufzai, was shot in the head for campaigning online for girls' educational rights.

However, Japan's press suffers from other problems. Noncooperation and the covering up of records are another way of reducing press freedom and keeping the truth from the public.

The latest low ranking of Japan is particularly disturbing because the issues surrounding the Fukushima No. 1 plant are just as important outside of Japan as inside Japan. Reporting exactly

what happened and why is an issue that extends to every country with nuclear power plants.

Full, accurate reporting on the Fukushima meltdowns can help ensure that such a disaster will not occur again anywhere else. What happened should not be covered up. It is the right of the public of Japan and the rest of the world to know what happened so it will not happen ever again.

Freedom of the press helps guarantee that right and helps ensure accountability from the government and corporations. If the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster is covered by a truly free press, Japan's ranking will move back up to where it should be; Japan, and the world for that matter, is likely to be a safer place.

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