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PROMETHEUS TRAP (12): Inject more water into the reactor

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Editor's note: This is the 12th part of a series that has run in the past under the overall title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with the different responses between Japan and the United States in dealing with the Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011 following the Great East Japan Earthquake. The series will appear on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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At 11:40 a.m. on March 17, shortly after the Ground Self-Defense Force's 1st Helicopter Brigade completed the mission to spray water on a crippled nuclear reactor that was dangerously overheating, Charles Casto of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) met with Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa at the minister's office in Tokyo.

Casto was chief of the team of experts the NRC had sent to Japan immediately after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami to help deal with the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Before his meeting with Kitazawa, Casto had visited Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), the operator of the disaster-stricken nuclear plant, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), the now-defunct body then responsible for regulating and supervising the nuclear power industry, and other organizations concerned, but had not got the detailed information he needed. It was not even clear which organization he should contact in the first place.

After several days of frustrating attempts to get what he wanted, Casto ended up visiting the defense chief.

The American nuclear energy expert immediately got down to business. The effects of the GSDF brigade's work to cool the reactor would be limited, Casto said. The amount of water that had been poured into the reactor was insufficient, he added, urging additional injections of water.

Casto didn't give much value to the dangerous mission that had just been accomplished by the GSDF in terms of its contribution to the efforts to contain the fast-moving nuclear crisis.

Kitazawa nodded as he listened to Casto's opinion. He and other top Japanese defense officials were fully aware that the volume of seawater that had been dropped on the reactor was insufficient.

Casto then demanded detailed information about the condition of the disabled reactors.

Defense Counselor Hideo Suzuki, who was present at the meeting, conveyed to the American official the information that had been provided by the NISA.

It was the kind of information Casto should have asked the agency to give him. But he opted to request the information from the Defense Ministry for a reason.

Three days earlier, on March 14, U.S. Ambassador to Japan John Roos asked the prime minister's office to allow NRC experts to be permanently stationed at the office to cooperate with the Japanese government in handling the crisis. But his request was politely declined.

That, along with the Japanese government's reluctance toward information disclosure, provoked the criticism within the U.S. government that Japan was hiding some vital information.

Concerned about the straining of Tokyo's ties with Washington at this crucial moment, Prime Minister Naoto Kan asked Kitazawa to do whatever he could do to keep the bilateral relationship from deteriorating further. Accordingly, the defense chief arranged his meeting with Casto.

The NRC official switched the subject to the No. 4 reactor, the main source of concern for the United States.

The Defense Ministry informed him that the GSDF's helicopter crew actually saw water in the spent fuel pool for the No. 4 reactor.

If so, Casto said, he wanted to know the temperature and the level of radiation being released from the reactor.

Kitazawa ordered an immediate survey to get these data.

The task was assigned again to the GSDF's 1st Helicopter Brigade. A few days later, a helicopter of the brigade flew above the nuclear power plant to do the survey.

It was then decided that the NRC and the Japanese ministries and agencies concerned would hold regular meetings, starting on March 18, to share information and discuss efforts to deal with the nuclear crisis.

On the Japanese side, officials from the NISA, TEPCO, the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry would attend the meetings.

The United States wished to work with Japan to put the situation at the Fukushima plant under control.

But the Japanese ministries and agencies were in disarray, not ready to make concerted and well-coordinated responses to the crisis.

The United States was in for serious conflict with its close ally in tackling the formidable safety challenge facing Japan.

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The previous installments of this series are available at:

- (1) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201301280006>
- (2) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201301300006>
- (3) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302010004>
- (4) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302040001>
- (5) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302060007>
- (6) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302080003>

(7) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302110006>

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(9) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302150001>

(10) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302180005>

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