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## PROMETHEUS TRAP (13): U.S. officials frustrated with Japanese at crisis meetings

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By HIROYOSHI ITABASHI/ Staff Writer

*Editor's note: This is the 13th 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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With the crisis raging at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the Japanese government agreed to hold regular meetings to share information and discuss responses.

At 10 a.m. on March 18, 2011, the conference between NRC representatives and Japanese officials began at the Defense Ministry, in accordance with the agreement reached the previous day.

Representatives of the U.S. forces stationed in Japan and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo were also present.

The meeting was presided over by the Defense Ministry, which was acting under instructions from the prime minister's office.

Nobushige Takamizawa, head of the ministry's Defense Policy Bureau, opened the meeting by declaring the strict confidentiality of the conference. He told the attendees not to disclose any information about the conference, including its very existence, not even to their colleagues in their organizations.

This declaration of secrecy at the outset of the meeting cast doubts on the very purpose of the forum, which was supposed to be the sharing of information.

Takamizawa had a list at hand. It showed the types of support the U.S. military had offered to provide. Among the dozens of items on the list were radiation management, decontamination and the supply of chemical technology.

But Takamizawa only read out part of the list without distributing copies to the attendees, who were only allowed to make notes.

The Defense Ministry classified the list as confidential.

The meeting that started at 4:40 p.m. on the following day, March 19, was also attended by officials from the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), including Hisanori Nei, deputy director-general for nuclear fuel cycle.

The NRC was prepared to offer complete cooperation to Japan's struggle with the nuclear crisis and asked for updates on the conditions of the reactors.

But the NISA showed little interest in sharing such information with the NRC. The agency's representatives at the meeting just kept saying they didn't know about the matter because they were not in charge of it. It was clear that they saw no point in having such discussions with

the U.S. regulatory body.

The NRC staff protested angrily. They said they wanted to cooperate with Japan but couldn't if they didn't have access to vital information.

Defense Counselor Hideo Suzuki urged the agency officials to be more cooperative, saying the Americans were trying to help Japan. But the agency refused to change its attitude.

Behind their recalcitrance was a directive from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which told them not to speak on their own at a meeting whose purpose was unclear.

On the other hand, Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Banri Kaieda called Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa on his cellphone and asked for the list compiled by U.S. forces of all the types of support they could provide.

The representative of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), the operator of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, at the meeting was a senior executive in charge of general affairs, instead of an engineer. The TEPCO official was unable to answer technical questions from the NRC and kept saying he would convey the questions to the company's headquarters.

An assistant director at the Foreign Ministry said nothing throughout the meeting except for introducing himself.

Time was wasted as even the roles and responsibilities of the attendees at the meeting were not clear. The talks only increased discontent among the Americans about the way their efforts to help Japan were being foiled as well as their distrust of the Japanese government.

The tension and friction between the two countries over the battle to bring the crisis under control began to decrease only after Japanese and U.S. officials started consultation on March 22 in a new conference established under the prime minister's office. The conference was designed to unify the policies and operations of all Japanese ministries and agencies concerning the bilateral cooperation over the Fukushima disaster.

Eleven days had already passed since the crisis broke out.

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*The previous installments of this series are available at:*

(1)

<http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201301280006>

(2)

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