

PROMETHEUS TRAP (2): U.S. officials feared for loved ones still in Japan

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

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One day after the top-secret diplomatic cable was sent from the Japanese Embassy in Washington to the Foreign Ministry, at 1:30 a.m. on March 16, 2011, U.S. Eastern Standard Time, a teleconference was hosted by the U.S. State Department. It was the afternoon of March 16 in Japan.

Among the 60 or so participants were officials of U.S. federal government departments, including the Defense Department, as well as the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo.

The theme of the meeting was the safety of U.S. troops and citizens living in Japan.

The meeting was held as events in the No. 1 to No. 3 reactors at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant were spiraling out of control and as a report surfaced that Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the plant, had asked that its workers be allowed to evacuate and, in effect, abandon the No. 4 reactor.

Because the storage pool at the No. 4 reactor contained a large number of nuclear fuel rods, everyone taking part in the conference realized they faced issues that called for serious discussions.

The conference was chaired by Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

A high-ranking military officer began the discussions by pointing out that there was no guarantee there was no danger involved in the Fukushima situation.

The view of the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet was also expressed by an associate who said no officer wanted a subordinate exposed to radiation.

The previous day, the U.S. Navy distributed a memo to the U.S. State and Defense departments that outlined its forecast for how the accident would evolve. The memo said there was a danger of Tokyo being contaminated with highly radioactive materials if the storage pool at the No. 4 reactor emptied of water and the nuclear fuel began a reaction.

The U.S. Navy had strict safety standards for radiation as well as a deep well of knowledge. That background gave the Navy's memo additional weight.

As the discussion continued, one phrase was repeatedly uttered, "While we can."

Everyone who used it realized that time was of the essence and that whatever could be done should be carried out quickly before further disaster developed.

Agreement was reached on one measure that could be implemented--immediately evacuating all U.S. citizens living near Tokyo, including

members of the U.S. military.

The sense of crisis held by those in Washington was magnified by their view that the Japanese government was not taking decisive action. Participants in the teleconference representing the U.S. Embassy as well as the U.S. military based in Japan were especially aware of the dangers facing their loved ones who were still in Japan.

The meeting demonstrated the huge gap that existed between the Japanese government, which only considered the Fukushima nuclear accident as an internal TEPCO matter; and the U.S. government, which had reached the conclusion that there was the possibility of a major disaster that could spread to a global scale.

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