

PROMETHEUS TRAP (6): SDF poised for dangerous mission into Fukushima

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Editor's note: This is the sixth 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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Around 10:30 a.m. on March 15, 2011, after a strictly confidential diplomatic cable from Ichiro Fujisaki, Japan's ambassador to the United States, reached his government in Tokyo, Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa canceled his entire schedule for the day.

Kitazawa convened an emergency meeting of senior ministry officials to discuss the possibilities of Self-Defense Forces operations being brought in to cool the overheating reactors at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

The discussions at the meeting focused on the No. 4 unit at the plant, which had just suffered an explosion that morning. The attendees were also informed that the confidential cable had said top U.S. military officer Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was deeply concerned about the risk posed by the No. 4 unit.

Nobushige Takamizawa, director-general at the ministry's Defense Policy Bureau, briefed Kitazawa on the opinions of the U.S. government. Takamizawa told Kitazawa that the U.S. military had pointed out the possibility that the spent fuel pool for the No. 4 reactor might be empty and urged that measures be taken immediately to cool the reactor first, including utilizing the SDF in the effort.

Hideo Suzuki, the ministry's secretariat counselor, conveyed the views of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency to the defense chief.

The agency had said TV footage of the explosion showing white steam rising from the No. 4 reactor indicated the presence of water in the pool, Suzuki told Kitazawa.

The debris scattered by the explosions at the No. 1 and No. 3 reactors had made it difficult to spray water on the crippled reactor from the ground.

By March 14, Prime Minister Naoto Kan had proposed to Kitazawa the use of SDF helicopters to spray water on the reactors. Kitazawa thought, without being indicated by the United States, that it was obvious that there was no choice but to use the SDF for the mission to cool the reactors.

A list of possible options compiled by the SDF included plans for spraying water from the ground or the air, as well as aerial drops of boric acid to prevent nuclear fission.

Kitazawa told top ground forces officer Yoshifumi Hibako, the chief of staff of the Ground Self-Defense Force, to carry out the mission after making careful preparations.

"We will do it with a firm resolve; leave it to us," Hibako told Kitazawa.

Kitazawa, however, wanted to avoid any death-defying mission that risked casualties among SDF personnel. He voiced his concerns about the safety of the SDF personnel that would be involved in the mission, which would require work amid high levels of radiation.

Kitazawa suggested that married SDF officers be excluded from the units involved in the operations at the disaster-stricken nuclear power plant.

Kitazawa, who had painful memories of the Pacific War, strongly believed in making every possible effort to ensure that troops didn't have to

perform any heroic acts that required them to put their lives at risk.

Immediately after the emergency meeting, Gen. Ryoichi Oriki, chief of staff of the SDF's Joint Staff, Japan's top military officer, received a phone call from Burton Field, commander of U.S. Forces Japan.

Field stressed the need to inject water into the spent fuel pool for the No. 4 reactor from above, effectively reiterating the point made by Mullen and described in the secret cable.

At 2 p.m. on the day, two section chief-level officials from Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the disabled plant, met with Suzuki and other senior government policymakers at the Defense Ministry.

Suzuki had asked for information needed for helicopter operations, such as the structure of the building housing the reactor and the height of steel towers around the building.

But the two TEPCO employees produced nothing but a ground plan showing the locations of facilities within the complex. It offered no information useful for the planned water-dumping operations involving helicopters.

"What did you come here for?" Suzuki yelled at the employees of the utility.

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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>

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