

PROMETHEUS TRAP (7): Gratitude expressed by Japan's commander in chief

February 11, 2013

1

By HIDEFUMI NOGAMI/ Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the seventh 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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By the afternoon of March 15, 2011, the Defense Ministry had prepared a rough plan to cool the overheating reactors at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant by using Self-Defense Forces helicopters for water air drops.

Around the same time, Prime Minister Naoto Kan was in his office on the fifth floor of the Prime Minister's office agonizing over a decision he had to make shortly.

The prime minister is the SDF's commander in chief. In the event of an invasion of Japan by a foreign country, there would be no hesitation in issuing an order to mobilize the SDF.

But what the nation was facing at the moment was a nuclear accident at home and the invisible threat of radiation from the crippled nuclear power plant. Kan was wondering what his decision should be.

In the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, Soviet soldiers were sent into the site to deal with the consequences in the face of life-threatening danger posed by high levels of radiation.

Kan was recalling what happened to these "liquidators," or cleanup workers at the Chernobyl accident site. He was unsure whether he could issue an order to send SDF personnel into the Fukushima plant on an extremely dangerous mission.

Legally speaking, it is the responsibility of Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the Fukushima plant, to deal with the situation. But the fact is that Kan, as the prime minister, was the only person who could make the decision to mobilize the SDF to contain the rapidly developing nuclear crisis.

At 3:58 p.m., Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa came into Kan's office, carrying a sheaf of documents describing a plan for SDF helicopters to spray water on the reactors.

"We have crafted a plan for spraying water on the reactors in the best possible way for preventing casualties (among the SDF personnel involved)," Kitazawa said, presenting the documents to Kan. "What do you think?"

Kan repeatedly expressed his gratitude. "I really appreciate that. I really appreciate that."

Gen. Ryoichi Oriki, chief of staff of the SDF's Joint Staff, the highest-ranking SDF officer, was accompanying Kitazawa to brief Kan on the plan. After explaining the operation to the prime minister, Oriki said, "Protecting the lives of people is our job, and we are ready to make all-out efforts (to carry out the mission) if we receive an order."

"I really appreciate that," Kan said again.

Oriki's words were reassuring to Kan, who was to issue an unprecedented order to mobilize the SDF to deal with the nuclear disaster.

During the hours leading up to this meeting, Japanese Ambassador to the United States Ichiro Fujisaki called the integrated government-TEPCO headquarters, which was responding to the nuclear crisis, to report that U.S. officials were urging the mobilization of the SDF to cope with the situation.

Immediately on the spot, Kan issued an order to the SDF to spray water to cool the reactors.

According to the plan, water would be sprayed on the No. 3 reactor from the air and on the No. 4 unit from the ground. There was the possibility that dumping water on the No. 4 reactor from above could cause a hydrogen explosion. The operations were to be carried out on the following day, March 16.

Kan's order was passed by Oriki through the chain of command to SDF troops chosen for the mission.

The Ground Self-Defense Force's 1st Helicopter Brigade was assigned to the water-dumping operation.

The brigade is composed of some 700 troops and a fleet of more than 30 aircraft, including Boeing CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters.

The unit had been carrying out airlifts to transport relief goods to areas hit by the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, operating from the GSDF's Camp Kasuminome in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, which has the Kasuminome Air Field.

Lead plates and protective sheets to shield SDF personnel from radiation during the operations were brought to Kasuminome and other SDF camps.

Whispers about the impending operations at the disaster-stricken plant started circulating among SDF members.

"It seems we will be used for operations at the No. 1 nuclear plant," some whispered. "We could die if we are sent to the plant," others said.

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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>

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