EDITORIAL

Stricken milk and vegetables

The government on Monday told Fukushima, Ibaraki, Tochigi and Gunma prefectures to suspend shipping of spinach and kakina, a locally produced leaf vegetable, following the detection of radioactive substances at levels above the provisional limits under the Food Sanitation Law. It also told Fukushima Prefecture to suspend shipping of raw milk for a similar reason. The radioactive substances apparently came from Tokyo Electric Power Co.’s stricken Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. The government the next day called on people to limit consumption of spinach, cabbage and a few other leaf vegetables from Fukushima Prefecture.

The government, which had ruled out a large-scale nuclear accident, had not set allowable limits for radioactive substances in farm products. The health ministry hurriedly established provisional limits and notified prefectural governments March 17.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said that even if one continues to eat 1 kg of the spinach every day for a year, the accumulated radiation level will be one-fifth that of one computerized tomography scan. And if one consumed the milk at the national average amount for a year, the accumulated radiation level would be about the same as that of one CT scan, he said.

But one cannot completely rule out the possibility of a chronic health problem if farm products with a low level of radioactivity are ingested over a long time. Radioactive iodine collects in the thyroid gland, and children are most likely to suffer from internal exposure to radiation leading to thyroid cancer. While radioactive iodine has a half-life of eight days; for radioactive cesium, it’s 30 years. The latter, though, is said to leave the body easily.

While the central and local governments must guard against radioactive contamination of food items, they must prevent a panic among consumers. They should carry out detailed radiation checks so that only products below the limits of contamination will be shipped to markets. They should provide accurate information to consumers to prevent an abnormal situation in which they refrain from buying even safe products. A close watch on fishery products will also be necessary.

We welcome your opinions. Click to send a message to the editor.
The government upped its casualty estimate for a killer quake-tsunami combo by more than a factor of 10. What's your take?

- Forewarned is forearmed. This information will save lives.
- All this does is scare people. It's not helpful.
- It's inspired me to think more seriously about possible evacuation routes.
- Numbers like these aren't much more than a guess.

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