TEPCO admits Fukushima crisis could have been avoided

By Mari Yamaguchi

NATIONAL OCT. 13, 2012 - 02:15PM JST ( 43 ) Recommend 99

TOKYO — The utility behind Japan’s nuclear disaster acknowledged for the first time Friday that it could have avoided the crisis.

Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) said in a statement that it had known safety improvements were needed before last year’s tsunami triggered three meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, but it had feared the political, economic and legal consequences of implementing them.

“When looking back on the accident, the problem was that preparations were not made in advance,” TEPCO’s internal reform task force, led by company President Naomi Hirose, said in the statement. “Could necessary measures have been taken with previous tsunami evaluations? It was possible to take action” by adopting more extensive safety measures, the task force said.

The task force said TEPCO had feared efforts to better protect nuclear facilities from severe accidents such as tsunamis would trigger anti-nuclear sentiment, interfere with operations or increase litigation risks. TEPCO could have mitigated the impact of the accident if it had diversified power and cooling systems by paying closer attention to international standards and recommendations, the statement said. TEPCO also should have trained employees with practical crisis management skills rather than conduct obligatory drills as a formality, it said.

The admissions mark a major reversal for the utility, which had defended its preparedness and crisis management since the March 2011 tsunami. The disaster knocked out power to the Fukushima plant, leading to the meltdowns, which forced massive evacuations and will take decades to clean up.

The statement was released after TEPCO held its first internal reform committee meeting, led by former U.S. nuclear regulatory chief Dale Klein. His five-member committee oversees the task force’s reform plans.

“It’s very important for TEPCO to recognize the needs to reform and the committee is very anxious to facilitate the reform necessary for TEPCO to become a world-class company,” Klein told a news conference. “The committee’s goal is to ensure that TEPCO develops practices and procedures so an accident like this will never happen again.”

The reform plans aim to use the lessons learned at TEPCO’s Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in northern Japan. The cash-strapped utility wants to restart that plant, but TEPCO officials denied the reform plans are aimed at improving public image to gain support for the plant’s resumption.

“The reforms are intended to improve our safety culture, and we have no intention to link it to a possibility of resuming the (Kashiwazaki-Kariwa) plant,” said Takaomi Anegawa, the TEPCO official in charge of nuclear asset management. “We don’t have any preconditions for our reforms.”

The Fukushima Daiichi plant has been substantially stabilized but is still running on makeshift equipment as workers continue their work to decommission the four damaged reactors, which could take several decades.

Additional safety measures have been installed at nuclear power plants nationwide since the
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Investigative reports compiled by the government and the parliament panels said collusion between the company and government regulators allowed lax supervision and allowed TEPCO to continue lagging behind in safety steps.

Despite records indicating a major tsunami had once hit off Japan’s northern coast, TEPCO took the most optimistic view of the risk and insisted that its 5.7-meter-high seawall was good enough. The tsunami that struck Fukushima Dai-ichi was more than twice that height.

The company had said in its own accident probe report in June that the tsunami could not be anticipated and that the company did the best it could to bring the critically damaged plant under control, although there were shortfalls that they had to review. TEPCO bitterly criticized what it said was excessive interference from the government and the prime minister’s office.

TEPCO’s Anegawa said the task force plans to compile by the end of the year recommendations “that would have saved us from the accident if we turn the clock back.”

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43 Comments 43

tabana OCT. 13, 2012 - 06:32AM JST Good | Bad
Wow! I'm surprised they admitted it. Now they'll feared the political, economic and legal consequences of not implementing them. Hopefully this will lead to more money for the victims, but I'm not holding my breath.

Disillusioned OCT. 13, 2012 - 06:55AM JST Good | Bad
but it had feared the political, economic and legal consequences of implementing them.
It's a shame they didn't fear the same consequences for NOT implementing them, isn't it?

Cricky OCT. 13, 2012 - 06:56AM JST Good | Bad
But, I don't understand, they said for the last year it was a "freak" accident they could not have planned for? Now they claim this???
Had they followed the law, had they played by the rules it would not have happened! Where is my helicopter? OH, someone else is using it! And there is a protocol for this.
We can't do anything but fly cash to you... Not like we care or have anyway to help. Why are the bosses not in jail? ,

yasukuni OCT. 13, 2012 - 07:02AM JST Good | Bad
"acknowledged for the first time Friday that it could have avoided the crisis."
Wow. "Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) said .... it had feared the political, economic and legal consequences of implementing them."
There's a lesson for all of us in there somewhere.
"feared efforts to better protect nuclear facilities from severe accidents such as tsunamis would trigger ... anti-nuclear sentiment."
"interfere with operations" And look what happened. I guess the real lesson is simply to do the right thing.
This case study should be taught from kindergarten. What better example is there of not doing the things that should be done because of reasons, which come back at you 1000 times bigger if you don't do them.
"Remember Fukushima!" "TEPCO bitterly criticized what it said was excessive interference from the government and the prime minister's office."
After all that they have the gall to criticize someone else? Amazing.

Hiniku OCT. 13, 2012 - 07:07AM JST Good | Bad
All over the world everyone has this perception that the Japanese are very professional and diligent... on an individual basis I think they are.... but on the corporate level... the inability of the individual to speak up degrades the structure.
TEPCO finally admits what many of us have been saying for a long time, even against those pro nuclear energy supporters who constantly justified it by stating it was a once in a thousand year event, there remains two main points.

Why is TEPCO still in business, especially the nuclear one? Not a single official from TEPCO, the govt or the heads of the previous safety agencies will face prosecution? That in itself is criminal.

The head of the new NRA has stated, no reactors will be started until all the atomic plants are inspected for safety and new safety standards are put in place, including protecting the atomic plants against terrorists, and making new laws. This will take at least one year to complete. He also stated he didn't understand why the Oi reactors were allowed to be restarted without new safety standards.
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It was a grave mistake and a gross error of judgement to allow private profit seeking companies to own and operate potentially dangerous atomic plants which will always put profit before safety. They were only able to build the very expensive plants with massive govt subsidies. They have cost the taxpayer trillions and the nuclear disaster will cost many more trillions and tens of decades to clean up. Likely to cost more than 50 trillion yen and the clean up and decommissioning will go on to the end of this century, and probably beyond.

The atomic plants should be owned and operated by the govt with safety before profit.

Over the decades, TEPCO earned trillions of yen from nuclear energy turning it into the largest power company in Asia, and the fourth largest in the world.

TEPCO are now spending billions to rebuild the second Fukushima atomic plant at Daini which was also badly damaged by the earthquake and tsunami. It must believe one day it will be able to restart the plant when that is highly unlikely. TEPCO are spending billion on the plant while most of the nuclear refugee's are still waiting to receive compensation.

Recently, the General Director of the IAEA, stated "the Fukushima nuclear disaster was now behind us". He also stated, that since the Level 7 nuclear disaster, safety at atomic plants across the world had been improved which is just another lie from this nuclear energy promoting agency.

In a recent leaked document from the EU, it states that all of the 145 reactors within the EU are operating at less than required safety standards, including two plants which would have core meltdowns after just one hour if they lost mains power. Other atomic power plants have more than 100,000 people living near them without a clear evacuation plan. It will cost more than 25 billion Euro's to update the safety standards of the reactors but the time scale wasn't stated.

The 145 EU reactors and the 50 in Japan accounts for nearly 50% of those globally. Most of the countries with atomic power plants have not resolved the problem of long term storage of spent nuclear fuel.

If a rich country like Japan failed to operate its atomic plants with less than the highest of safety standards, it becomes a major concern when poor countries like India start building them, or countries like India and China which also have major corruption problems.

Disillusioned OCT. 13, 2012 - 08:36AM JST

As much as this is good news and common knowledge for most, they still are not addressing the safety issues that caused the meltdowns. They need to waterproof the electrical systems and get the back up generators off ground level or the same thing will happen again. Until they do this there is no safety. Sea walls are not enough.

MasterBape OCT. 13, 2012 - 08:44AM JST

In the light of wanting to start other reactors, this is a ploy to make it look like should another disaster occur, the nuclear power station will be in complete control.

They have learned the errors of their ways and no human error could possibly happen again.

Think about it.

If anyone is charged, I stand correct, but nobody will be arrested and questioned.

smithinjapan OCT. 13, 2012 - 09:01AM JST

Well then, start by putting Shimizu in cuffs, then locking up the rest of the former administration. If it could have been avoided that means that the company is legally to blame for the trillions it's going to take for clean-up, the trillions in government bailouts, the many, many suicides that have occurred as a result of the thousands upon thousands displaced due to the incident.

Now, I know that the government literally owns a majority stake in the company now, but how can a nation sit by and suffer while these guys clown around, make millions, deny responsibility, then have others later admit people before them were irresponsible -- and all the while no one does ANYTHING about it??

Zich OCT. 13, 2012 - 09:03AM JST

The 20 or so TEPCO directors who resigned over the nuclear disaster received massive payoffs. At the beginning of this year most of them had landed other well paid jobs in companies which TEPCO is a major stakeholder. They are laughing all the way to the bank.

Meanwhile, TEPCO workers, especially engineers are leaving the company in droves.

The number of workers leaving Tokyo Electric Power Co. nearly doubled to some 350 in the April-September quarter from about 180 a year earlier, according to company sources.

http://www.japan-times.co.jp/textmb20121011b1.html

Tokyo Electric Power Co. was considering detailed plans to pull workers from its crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant at the outset of the crisis there in March 2011, video footage of the company's accident response shows.

http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/12102819002360.htm

Smithinjapan OCT. 13, 2012 - 09:09AM JST

alladin: "That is not in the Japanese way of doing things. I thought it was better for the Japanese to lie and cover up their mistakes!!"

No, the Japanese way is to deny the obvious, continue to deny the obvious when presented with the facts, 'retire' for health reasons while saying it was not your fault, accept a massive payout (golden parachute), take up a job as a 'special consultant' and make a huge salary at a sister company, then leave it to your successor to admit a few years down the road that there were problems in the past, but that current administration cannot be blamed as they have improved things. (rinse, repeat).
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Incredible how having just one foreigner overseeing TEPCO's "reform" committee makes them admit what they denied for so long. (echoes of Olympus here)? Japan Inc. needs more top class foreigners within their rotten useless amakudari infested boards and top management than ever to force proper disclosure and accountability here. Of course we all know they will never permit it unless they face the most dire of situations.

Eric Schneider OCT. 13, 2012 - 09:14AM JST

Well, that took long enough. Seppuku, anybody. Who wants to be first?

yasukuni OCT. 13, 2012 - 09:27AM JST

@Smith - bareta!

ares7 OCT. 13, 2012 - 10:17AM JST

First step to recovery is to admit you have a problem. Good for TEPCO to admit to this. Now go and improve the system!

realmind OCT. 13, 2012 - 10:52AM JST

TEPCO should invest in solar energy than nuclear power. Dismiss all those amakudaris are employ only necessary people. Cut the costs and make more solar power for Japan. Be the model for all other nations...We see a better world. We need house hold electricity power house....

warispeace OCT. 13, 2012 - 10:52AM JST

Time for everyone to stop calling it an "accident" (事故) and start calling it a "man-made disaster" (人災). Also time to start litigation proceedings.

yokatta OCT. 13, 2012 - 11:13AM JST

Obvious and old news of the day!

SquidBert OCT. 13, 2012 - 11:28AM JST

Now bring in the spin-doctors

herefornow OCT. 13, 2012 - 01:52PM JST

should have trained employees with practical crisis management skills rather than conduct obligatory drills as a formality

21st century Japan in a nutshell. Process over meaningful results. And no leaders with the guts to be real change agents since they are all products of this "paper-pushing" system themselves. Very depressing.

GW OCT. 13, 2012 - 12:10PM JST

Well we are hearing what we all have known! But lets remember these EXACT problems are pervasive IN ALL OF JAPAN INC!

Japan must stop with only dealing with perception, it needs to deal with reality in every industry in this country. As its all rotten at the core & has been spreading onwards for decades now

And like other I demand management of the past decade be rounded up for trial, no suspended sentences either, bonuses & pensions repossessed, assets liquidated, GET GOING ALREADY!

ramses68 OCT. 13, 2012 - 01:52PM JST

I can't help but be left wondering if there was something lost in translation here.

How is it that increasing the safety of a nuclear plant leads to anti nuclear backlash? Any ideas? I can understand them saying... We want to line our pockets with more profits. I can understand them saying... It's too troublesome and costly, therefore it's easier to pay off government regulators. I am having a hard time swallowing how they can say that making their nuclear fleet safer would somehow trigger anti nuclear backlash.

The logic behind this is flawed to my way of thinking. Are they trying to say that the meltdown is the fault of the anti nuclear crowd because if they improved safety people would complain? Therefore we didn't do it and now we had a meltdown? It's our fault, but it isn't?
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10/13/2012

There is only one reason why these guys are admitting fault, and that is because if they didn't it would be an argument against continued use of nuclear power. If you can't avoid accidents, then you shouldn't run nuclear power plants would be the obvious argument.

However, the reasons that they have given for not doing things properly are mostly nonsense. They routinely skipped on safety procedures to make more money. That was the bottom line then, and a monetary motivation for this admission of theirs is the bottom line now.

I think we should at least give them credit for this where credit's due. Sure it's not much, but it's something.

Nice timing to admit all this NOW when the country is more preoccupied with China and some islands. Heh.

Just one small objection here for a minute, quote: “Additional safety measures have been installed at nuclear power plants nationwide since the accident under the government’s instructions, including enhancing seawalls,...”

Er, no. Fukushima Daiichi has a hastily-erected temporary plug in front of it. They are not building a wall there, perhaps because they are not planning to be operating those melted-down reactors again. It is virtually defenseless right now.

If another Tsunami comes, everything will be destroyed and washed out to sea, causing the worst nuclear disaster in history. But at least Tepco will be able to finally wash their hands of it and say with conviction “This was an unforeseen natural disaster. Now it really is not our problem any more.”

Except that this time it will be, once again...man-made.

No surprise on no punishment, as all Govts of the world are corrupt and run by the billionaires. In some countries, however, the billionaires are benevolent and the population is happy. Mostly Socialistic countries.

They are admitting now because they want to built a 40 meter high tsunami wall and a water proof cooling system lol...

This is criminal! They now admit they knew their safety was not upto scratch! Why is there NO ONE IN JAIL?

By admitting 19 months after the fact, they are forcing us to believe they can make secure NPP to re-start them. This is nothing else than a vicious PR from the nuke village: sacrifice TEPCO the incompetent to validate the "international NPP security standard". While the IAEA did nothing in the past 30 years!

almxx Oct. 13, 2012 - 04:52PM JST

No surprise on no punishment, as all Govts of the world are corrupt and run by the billionaires. In some countries, however, the billionaires are benevolent and the population is happy. Mostly Socialistic countries.

hkitagawa Oct. 13, 2012 - 06:42PM JST

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Open Minded Oct. 13, 2012 - 11:11PM JST

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yosun Oct. 14, 2012 - 01:02AM JST

But other govt at least have some basic knowledge, France and US govt proposed to help but both them were rejected in the very beginning! After 311, JP people did well but JP Govt was totally useless!

Most legally advanced nations have strict liability laws concerning dangerous substances-in my reckoning if it can be shown that radioactive substances have entered the food chain and/or our bodies then Tepco is liable.

In the event that I contract cancer I will have the radioactive contamination check and will instruct my lawyer to sue Tepco.

Ex PM Kan was the first to call the nuclear disaster manmade. TEPCO tried to smear him and blame him for the nuclear disaster. Kan took an anti nuclear energy stand and was forced from office.
Dr Kenichi Ohmae in his extensive investigation and report called the nuclear disaster manmade because the safety standards at the atomic plants are based on probabilities instead of possibilities. The Diet Commission which interviewed more than 1000 people also called the nuclear disaster manmade. The admittance by TEPCO that the nuclear disaster was manmade and responsible for causing it vindicates everything stated by ex PM Kan.