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TEPCO failed to respond to dire warning of radioactive water leaks at Fukushima

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Tokyo Electric Power Co. dawdled on measures to prevent leaks of highly radioactive water during the Fukushima nuclear crisis, despite the plant manager's warning that "we are idly waiting for death."

The radioactive water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant eventually flowed into the sea.

TEPCO's inaction was revealed in a second batch of videos shown to journalists on Nov. 30. The videos cover 335 hours and 54 minutes of TEPCO's in-house teleconferences from March 16-23 and from March 30 through April 6 during the early phases of last year's disaster.

Masao Yoshida, general manager of the crippled nuclear plant, had been calling for the installation of cameras in the turbine buildings of the No. 1 through No. 4 reactors to gauge water levels. He feared that radioactive coolant water was leaking out of the reactors.

About 100,000 tons of water had accumulated in the basements of turbine buildings as frantic efforts to cool off the damaged reactors continued.

On March 27, water was found leaking into a pit between a turbine building and the sea. The water level in the pit was several dozen centimeters short of overflowing and pouring into the sea.

"I can't help but feel that we are idly waiting for death," the footage showed Yoshida telling officials at TEPCO headquarters in Tokyo at 6:38 p.m. on March 30.

His pleas continued at a teleconference that started at 8:20 p.m. the same day.

"It's like my heart could stop at any moment when I think about the water levels," he said. "I request quick installation of a mechanism to monitor water level variations both remotely and accurately."

But Ichiro Takekuro, a senior official at the head office, only gave a halfhearted response.

"I think we will probably be able to discuss things tomorrow, including setting really concrete goals," he said.

The cameras were not installed before workers at the Fukushima plant reported a disturbing development to the TEPCO head office around 11 a.m. on April 2. They discovered radioactive water was leaking into the sea from a crack in the wall of a working pit near the water intake of the No. 2 reactor.

"We have confirmed a worst-case situation," a plant official said. "Water with very high radiation levels, exceeding 1,000 millisieverts per hour, is flowing into the sea."

The leak was plugged at dawn on April 6, after a chemical agent was injected into the crack to vitrify sand.

TEPCO said an estimated 520 cubic meters of radioactive water leaked into the sea from the pit.

TEPCO's release of the videos followed earlier disclosure in August of 150 hours and 42 minutes of recordings from March 11-15, 2011. The meltdowns at the Fukushima plant were caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on March 11 that year.

The first three hours or so in the March 16 footage lacked sound.

For both disclosures, journalists were allowed to view the footage but could not make audio or video recordings. They were also told not to publish individuals' names that were not mentioned in TEPCO's disaster investigation report.

(This article was written by Takashi Sugimoto and Hideaki Kimura.)

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