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Sato Eisaku's Warning

David McNeill

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

佐藤栄佐久の警告

By David McNeill

The worst-case scenario of Japan's nuclear crisis, reportedly floated by Prime Minister Naoto Kan on the dark night of March 16, that much of the east of the country including Tokyo could be "wrecked" has been averted. The reality though is shocking enough.

A 20km zone around the ruined Daiichi nuclear power complex has been irradiated, emptying towns and villages in Fukushima Prefecture of about 80,000 people who do not know when they can return. Unknown quantities of radiation continue to seep into the sea from the plant, which is swimming in 70,000 tons of toxic water.

Beyond the evacuation zone, thousands more are exposed, perhaps dangerously so – the government now plans to hike the limits of radiation exposure for children in the prefecture to 20 milliSievert per year, twenty times the annual allowable dose for adults elsewhere. Making the plant safe will take nine months; euthanising it and dismantling its plutonium and cesium-riddled corpse is a job of decades, costing billions of dollars.

The story of this epic disaster comes with a generous cast of Cassandra figures, the seismologists, conservationists and whistle-blowers ignored by the national nuclear planners. The most striking may be Eisaku Sato (71), who was governor of Fukushima Prefecture from 1988 – 2006, "roughly half the life of the plant," he told journalists at the Foreign Correspondent's Club this week.

Like his predecessors, Sato was an initial enthusiast for nuclear power after the government and utility giant Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco) brought his prefecture jobs, subsidies and a chance to contribute to the national good. In 1998 he conditionally green-lighted the controversial use of mixed oxide plutonium uranium (MOX) fuel at the plant, then withdrew it after discovering a cover-up of reactor malfunctions and cracks.

"Between 2002 and 2006, 21 problems at the Fukushima plant were reported to my office," he said. The whistleblowers, including some employees at the plant, bypassed both Tepco

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and Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) because they feared – rightly – that their information would go straight to Tepco. Sato became an increasingly bitter critic of the plant and Japan's entire energy policy, directed by NISA's powerful government overseer, the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry.

In 2006 he was forced to step down and was prosecuted and convicted in 2008 on bribery charges that he claims were politically motivated. Embittered, he wrote a biography called "Annihilating a Governor" explaining his concerns about nuclear power and how he was set and wrongfully convicted by the prosecution. Largely ignored until March 11, the book is at the top of the sales list this week. "Unfortunately it took this tragedy to make it a bestseller," he laments.

Despite his new audience, he says Japan's big newspapers and TV companies continue to ignore him. "Those who say that nuclear power is dangerous, like myself, are treated as state enemies. This is a truly terrifying logic, is it not? Whoever it may be, be it a Diet member or governor, no one has been able to fight such logic thus far." He calls the national policy "nuclear absolutism."

Sato says there was a dry run for the March 11 disaster last year after power stopped to pumps sending water to reactor 2 on June 17, 2010. Tepco was repeatedly asked what would happen if the backup diesel generators also failed but the company waived this concern away, he says. Last month's crisis was triggered when the magnitude 9 quake knocked out the plant's electricity and a 15-meter tsunami poured over the building housing the backup generators, which were only designed to withstand a 5.7 meter wave.

Sato snorts at Tepco's famous statement immediately afterwards that the quake/tsunami was a "disaster beyond our expectations," pointing to the string of huge tsunamis that have battered Japan's eastern coastline for millennia and the steady stream of academic warnings about the probability of a seismic event beyond the capacity of the plant to withstand. "This was a disaster waiting to happen," he concludes.

And the lesson? Replacing Tepco's management won't solve anything, he says, because the logic of Japan's energy policies is that nuclear power generation is absolutely necessary. "So nuclear power must be seen as absolutely safe, you see?" Ordinary people must "take democracy into their own hands, because if they do not, 10 years from now we will see another disastrous situation. It's almost as though we are in a fascist country where information is hidden from the public. I believe that this is time for Japan to wake up and see what the situation is."

Also see: Onuki Satoko, Former Fukushima Governor Sato Eisaku Blasts METI –TEPCO Alliance: "Government must accept responsibility for defrauding the people

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