Japan: Nuclear Madness

- Homepage - News - External sources -

Publication date: Thursday 13 November 2003

A report from Japan for the conference in Linz, Austria, November 2003.
For a brighter future - Strategies for a world without nuclear madness.

I. Introduction

Since President Bush seized power in a highly questionable way in November 2000, the global situation has become more serious and gloomy with the intensification of a pro-nuclear energy policy in the U.S., as well as of the continued research and development of mini-nukes, the continued conducting of underground subcritical tests, and the continued nuclearization of space.

Especially after 9.11. 2001, the US call for war on terrorism has deeply undermined the long-established international framework for peace and security of the worl. Even in this dismal situation, we have several pieces of good news regarding the nuclear energy issue:

1) The Monju verdict in Japan (January)
2) The shutdown of all the reactors of TEPCO for a period of time (April)
3) The victory of the Jabiluka campaign in Australia
4) BNFL's decision to close THORP
5) The delay of starting up the Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant

II. The Monju FBR and the Japanese MOX program

Japan now has 51 commercial reactors in operation. Besides these PWRs and WRs, there is a prototype fast breeder reactor named "Monju" in the Fukui Prefecture. The Monju reactor started its operations in August 1995, but it has been shut down since its sodium leak and fire that occurred in December of the same year. The FBR project was the major goal of Japan's nuclear program, being a plan to produce more plutonium than is consumed as it burns in the reactor.

The residents in the vicinity of Monju as well as citizens around Japan are gravely concerned, and the local people have been struggling in court over this issue. On January 27, 2003, the Nagoya High Court ruled out the construction standard of the Monju reactor, accepting the plaintiff's arguments re: the high risk of sodium fire and collapse of the core, though it rejected the argument on the seismic risks of the Monju design.

The victory was gained by means of the long, hard struggle of the residents, citizens, and experts working together. International support was also a helpful factor in achieving this positive outcom.

However, the government is angry with this verdict and has appealed it to the supreme court. Further, it intends to repair the plant before the supreme court hands down its judgment, planning to restart it as soon as possible.

Japan will eventually obtain more than 400 tons of plutonium according to a calculation based on the government's long-term nuclear energy project which began in November 2000. Japan has already obtained more than 30 tons of plutonium separated from spent fuel. However, as yet, there is no definitive perspective about how the plutonium is to be used.

As the result of the Monju accident and its shut-down, the government now plans to burn plutonium in the

conventional reactors in the form of plutonium-uranium mixed oxide (MOX) fuel. But because of the series of scandals and defaults at the reactors around the country, the MOX program planned in three prefectures (Fukui, Fukushima, and Niigata) has faced strong local grassroots resistance, and is now at a complete stand still. The utilities are losing the public's trust rapidly, because of their attempt to hide the falsification of fuel data supplied by the BNFL (1999), and their attempted cover-up of records regarding the cracks at the reactors of TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) (2002), as well as of the criticality accident at the JCO company in Tokaimura, Ibaraki Prefecture.

However, Kansai Electric (KEPCO) is planning to contract with French COGEMA to fabricate MOX fuel at its facility. (WISE/NIRS Nuclear Monitor 594) KEPCO emphasizes that they will "take every opportunity to promote activities...to gain back public trust in nuclear power".

III. Reprocessing

The Japanese utilities have sent more than 7000 tons of spent fuel for separating plutonium to Sellafield in Britain and La Hague in France.

The Japanese government and utilities argue that nuclear power is safe and clean, and is essential for preventing global warming by means of avoiding CO2 emissions. They also insist that electric demand will continue to grow, so we need more nuclear energy. We Japanese citizens have been overwhelmed by daily propaganda on TV, and in the newspapers. But very few people have been informed that our nuclear waste has been shipped to foreign countries and is contaminating the environment there with deadly poisons. There was almost no media coverage of this at the OSPAR meeting, as well as of the increase of leukaemia cases in the vicinity of the reprocessing plants. There has been no major report in the media about the BNFL's decision to close THORP by 2010.

Reprocessing is a chemical process to extract plutonium and unburned uranium 235 from the spent fuel of nuclear reactors. The Japanese government, in response to criticism concerning nuclear proliferation, insists that the plutonium Japan is separating is reactor grade for "peaceful use", not weapons grade (more than 93 percent purity) .

But experts point out that reactor grade plutonium could be diverted into military use. According to the IAEA, 8kg of reactor grade plutonium is a "significant quantity", enough to make one nuclear bomb.

As we see no demand for commercial use of plutonium, a major and obvious question is why is Japan going to operate the huge reprocessing plant constructed in Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture?

The Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant had been scheduled to start testing using uranium in October 2003, and to start operation in July 2005. But in September, the government and operator announced the delay of the start-up of the plant until July 2006, while uranium testing is to be delayed three months, until January 2004. This is because of problems such as water leakage from the spent fuel pool, as well as nearly 300 failures of pipe welding.

If the Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant does start operation, it will have the capacity to separate 7 tons of plutonium per year. It will continuously contaminate the environment in a wide area surrounding it. Once the uranium testing starts, the whole plant will be contaminated and it would be very difficult to return to past conditions.

Therefore, we demand the cancellation of the reprocessing program, not merely delaying the start-up of the operation.

IV. Japan's involvement in nuclear colonialism

The first victims of the nuclear death chain have been indigenous peoples around the world. The nuclear cycle including uranium mining, processing of nuclear weapons, nuclear testing, operation of nuclear power plants, and waste dumping, all conducted primarily on the lands of indigenous peoples. The Japanese utilities are importing uranium for "peaceful use of nuclear power" from the indigenous peoples' lands in North America, Africa, and Australia.

The victory of the Jabiluka Campaign in Australia was the first success that Japanese citizens were involved in. In late July 2003, Rio Tint finally decided to abandon its plan to explore new mining at the World Heritage site in the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia. KEPCO and several other companies had invested in the project. The victory at Kakadu was achieved by the cooperative action of the traditional landowners and Australian environmental movements supported by worldwide anti-nuclear opinion. The campaign included peaceful direct action. Quite a few Japanese citizens' groups, especially groups in Kansai district (Kyoto, Osaka), joined the campaign when the World Heritage Committee was held in Kyoto in 1998.

The story of the aboriginal people in Kakadu is included in the book "Pacific Women Speak Out" (Edited by Zhol de Ishtar) together with other impressive testimonies of the islanders about their harsh experience under nuclear colonialism and their brave struggle for a nuclear free and independent Pacific. (English, German, and Japanese versions are available.)

V. Nuclear exports from Japan

Proliferation of nuclear power plants in Asia is a major concern. While the construction of new NPPs has almost stopped in America and Europe, a pro-nuclear energy policy based on the NPT is gaining strength in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Western nuclear countries are seeking a new market in South-Eastern Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Philippines.

Since 1993, No Nukes Asia Forum, the Asian anti-nuclear network, has been vigorously working to prevent further proliferation of nuclear power plants in this region.

Taiwan (the Republic of China) has a history of nuclear weapons development during the 1980's, and has not yet signed the NPT. There are six nuclear reactors in operation at three sites in Taiwan.

The Japanese companies Hitachi, Toshiba, and Mitsubishi, in cooperation with the US company GE, are constructing two reactors of the fourth NPP (ABWR) on the northeast coast of Taiwan despite opposition of the Taiwanese people. The site is in a national park and it originally belonged to the indigenous people there. The construction started without any information or any consultation with the indigenous people.

Instead, the people's homes were torn down after the residents were forcibly driven out of their village.

In June, 2003, a cargo ship loaded with a pressure vessel of a reactor left the Port of Kure in Hiroshima despite the protests of Japanese citizens groups. The construction of the reactors is continuing, but we in Japan are protesting this in many ways, together with the Taiwanese people.

VI. Earthquakes

From the seismic viewpoint, it is unbelievable that there are 50-plus nuclear facilities scattered throughout Japan's islands, as these islands are riddled with countless active earthquake faults. (see the map)

Geologically speaking, Japan enjoyed a comparatively calm period for about 40 years after the end of WWII. This contributed to the unusually rapid post-war economic development of Japan. However, the last decade of the 20th century saw the beginning of another unstable period, with a series of major earthquakes, including the one that hit Kobe City and its vicinity in January 1995. The toll caused by that earthquake rose to more than 6000. The damage to buildings, highways, railways including the Shinkansen was extremely widespread, but fortunately there were no nuclear power plants located there.

A geologist, Dr. Sunao Ogose, had warned that such a disaster could take place in Kobe, pointing out the existence of an active fault, as well as the vulnerability of modern structures.

This year, Japan experienced three big earthquakes in May, July, and September. The first two (M=7.1 and M=8.0) were in Miyagi Prefecture in Northern Japan. A small leak of coolant was reported at the Onagawa NPP.

The latest one hit Hokkaido on September 26, and it was huge, registering 8.0. More than 500 peopled were injured, and great damage was reported from the subsequent tsunami waves. A serious fire was caused by the shock experienced at the petroleum refinery plant in Tomakomai City, on the southern coast of Hokkaido. The fire restarted at the same plant two days later and continued burning for 44 hours. (WISE/NIRS Nuclear Monitor 594)

According to plate tectonics theory, Japan is floating on huge plates that are moving very slowly. Japan's islands are located on the borders of four such plates: the Eurasian, North American, Philippine, and Pacific. Seismic experts are now warning of possible huge earthquakes caused by dynamic plate movement in the near future. Although the government publicly claims that nuclear reactors and related facilities are earthquake-proof, there remain serious questions re: seismic safety in case of a huge earthquake. No one can guarantee their safety.

Citizens in the Shizuoka Prefecture filed a lawsuit to shut down the NPP at Hamaoka, as the area is regarded as the most likely to be hit by a major earthquake.

The Monju FBR, although it has been shut down since December 1995, is standing on an active fault that the government is reluctant to

acknowledge. The Monju reactor is loaded with plutonium, and tons of sodium are still circulating in its long, winding pipes. If the active fault beneath the Monju moves, causing a strong shock, the resulting catastrophe would be incredible. Dr. Ogose says that most dangerous reactor from a seismic viewpoint would be the Monju.

Seismic problems are also extremely serious at the Rokkasho Reprocessing plant and other nuclear facilities such as the uranium, enrichment plant, the permanent storage of low level radioactive waste, and the temporary storage of the high level waste. There is a major active fault, 84 km long, running along the Pacific coast that includes the Rokkashomura facilities.

There are also many other dangerous seismic situations. In 1997, there were two big earthquakes that hit very close to the Sendai NPP in Kyushu. The energy was even bigger than that of the Kobe earthquake in 1995. Three reactors of the Ikata NPP are built close to one of the two largest active faults in Japan.

Again, there is no way to forecast an earthquake exactly, and the government underestimates the seismic risks and dangers at the nuclear power plants regarding their ability to withstand seismic movement.

However, more experts and politicians than ever are now expressing concern. For instance, Mitsuhei Murata, former ambassador to Switzerland, is calling for the immediate shut down of the Hamaoka NPP, as well as for the phase out of Japan's pro-nuclear energy policy. Also, several local councils have passed resolutions to stop the Hamaoka NPP.

VII. Nuclear Proliferation

The second NPT review conference is to be held in New York in 2005. The Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was created to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. But unfortunately, the NPT's extremely important Article 6th ---the obligation to disarm by the nuclear weapons states --- has never been respected.

On the other hand, Article 4 of the NPT --- the right to "atoms for peace" has been promoted vigorously by many party states and non-signatory countries such as India and Pakistan. Most of the UN member nations have signed the NPT except for India, Pakistan, and Israel. DPRK has announced its withdrawal recently.

The IAEA's role is a contradictory one â€” that of nuclear watchdog, and at the same time, nuclear salesman. It is safer and easier for a state to obtain nuclear materials or technologies by means of "atoms for peace" than to gain them through smuggling or espionage. We have seen

this in the cases of Iran, Iraq, India and Pakistan.

Japan is openly promoting a massive use of plutonium under the guise of civilian use. A fast breeder reactor can produce super-grade plutonium through its operation. The Monju reactor has been shut down, but there is another FBR called Joyo, an experimental reactor, which doesn't generate electricity. The tragic accident at JCO in Tokaimura in 1999 occurred during the process of fuel fabrication for the Joyo which is located in the next town to Tokaimura.

Japan has the capability for creating nuclear warheads and also for developing the H2A rocket equivalent for ICBMs. With the growing power of the right wingers who are trying to trash Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the possibility of a Japanese nuclear arsenal is becoming stronger.

Further, regardless of the legal obligation for a peaceful space program, Japan launched its first military satellite from Tanegashima in March 2003. It also sent troops to the Indian Ocean to support the US-UK war on Iraq. And it is going to dispatch troops to Iraq. All these actions violate the Japanese constitution.

It is ironic that the war on Iraq has resulted in greater public attention being paid to civil nuclear systems that continue to produce DU. Incidentally, "Depleted Uranium" is an incorrect name. It should be called ?"dirty, dangerous, and destructive" uranium.

DU is waste generated by the nuclear chain involving both military and civil nuclear production. At Rokkashomura, the enrichment plant has already generated more than 7000 tons of deadly DU.

VIII. Our desire

Now, more than ever, the anti-nuclear energy movement must join with the environmental movement, the human rights movement, the anti-war movement, and anti-nuclear weapons movement.

It is natural and vital for us to coordinate these movements globally in order to achieve a sustainable and secure world free from the nuclear threat. Mr. Akiba, Mayor of Hiroshima, as President of "Mayors for Peace", is calling for a strong campaign for nuclear abolition. In Japan, there are many grassroots groups working ceaselessly to stop the nuclear insanity. These noble efforts are also frequently seen in many other parts of the world. It is obvious that if all these activities work co-operatively, nuclear abolition is more likely to become a reality. If we trust and support each other, our dream of a nuclear free planet will come true.

I express my deepest gratitude to Sally Light who patiently edited my humble report.

Satomi Oba (WISE Japan)
Director of Plutonium Action Hiroshima