

FUKUSHIMA AT 5, CHORNOBYL AT 30: OPPORTUNITIES MISSED, LESSONS NOT LEARNED

By Dave Kraft, Director, Nuclear Energy Information Service (NEIS)
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The 5th anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster seems an apt time to recall the advice of philosopher and essayist George Santayana, who warned: *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”* Regrettably, the Orwellian truth is that the history of the ongoing Fukushima nuclear disaster is not only being “forgotten;” it is being radically altered by what the late Jeff Patterson, past President of Physicians for Social Responsibility, called “nuclear industry SCUM: Secrecy, Cover-Up, and Minimization,” that nuclear industry advocates and their supporters in governments proliferate. This inevitably results in opportunities being missed, and lessons going unlearned.

In Chicago the week before the March 11th anniversary, the Japanese Consulate announced a series of memorial events relating to the disaster. Virtually all the focus was on the effects of the tsunami. Virtually nothing was mentioned about the ongoing nuclear disaster. This massive and obvious denial of the existence of what is arguably one of the largest industrial disasters in the human history recalls the same kind of reaction the Japanese government took towards the Rape of Nanking and the Korean “comfort girls.” It is hard to learn anything useful that would prevent the recurrence of future disasters when the perpetrators don’t even acknowledge the existence of the ongoing problem.

Recent headlines lend credence to Patterson’s SCUM theory. As recently as Feb 24th it was revealed [3] that both TEPCo and the Japanese government knew that reactors had melted down as early as March 12, 2011, yet both denied this until May of that year, and for years refused to admit to the extent of the damage. Reports of under-reporting radiation levels [5], worker exposures and injuries, and extent of hazard have all been trickling out over the past five years.

Japan’s responses to the disaster in light of the revelation of situations far worse than officially acknowledged have been equally Orwellian – if not outright criminal. In the five years since the disaster, the Japanese Government has: repeatedly understated or outright lied about the seriousness of the initial disaster, and the subsequent levels of pollution and contamination relating to it and the clean-up [1,2,3]; enacted “secrecy laws” that would result in the prosecution of journalists reporting negatively on the disaster and the so-called “clean-up” operations; decided that all of Japan should “share the pain” of the disaster, by spreading around to all other prefectures the millions of bags of radioactively contaminated debris [8] collected in the Fukushima area, as well as incinerating this waste in those other prefectures; deemed foods grown in the Fukushima area safe for consumption and export; minimized the emergence of a spike in thyroid-related conditions, as well as the 100+ surgeries that have taken place relating to thyroid disease [8]; refused clean-up help from the 700+ retired nuclear personnel of the Skilled Veterans Corps for Fukushima, who not only had professional expertise to offer, but who because of age were attempting to reduce exposure to younger workers of reproduction ages.

The government has totally ignored the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of Japanese people protesting the restart of Japan’s reactors (echoing sentiments of 2/3 of the population), and calling for their replacement with renewable energy. Currently, it is in effect forcing evacuees to return to potentially contaminated areas or else lose their victim compensation. And certainly not the least – it has failed to prosecute **anyone** from TEPCo or the government for their contributing roles in the ongoing disaster.

It has taken five years for anyone to finally be indicted [4] for their actions/inactions relating to the disaster. While the Japanese government itself could not find any wrongdoing serious enough to indict anyone for the perpetual radioactive contamination of the Pacific Ocean and large swathes of eastern Japan, and the displacement of 160,000 people and 3,200 evacuation-related deaths, a rarely used civilian judicial panel finally did on February 29, 2016 – five years after the fact, and after repeated government inaction. Three former TEPCo officials were recently (and some news accounts point out – finally) indicted on charges of professional negligence resulting in injury and death. Perhaps the government reasoned that if Nanking was not so bad, Fukushima must simply be a misdemeanor.

TEPCo too has engaged in its own levels of obfuscation and questionable behaviors relating to the clean-up. They have lied on numerous occasions to the Japanese government, as well as the international community [2,3,4,5]; employed clean-up sub-contractors and personnel reportedly with ties to the Yakuza; provided workers little training and not much in the way of personal protection from irradiation and contamination; demonstrated no ability to stanch the flow of radioactively contaminated water from the reactors and into the Pacific Ocean, finally publicly admitting that they felt they would have to release contaminated water directly at some point. It has also reneged on mediated victim compensation payment agreements [7].

Although further removed in time and buried in the collective consciousness of a society that seems to demonstrate the recall capacity of a fruit fly, the Chernobyl disaster of 30 years ago continues to offer its own unique examples of “SCUM”. While numerous health organizations, NGOs and individual governments report deaths and health effects into the hundreds of thousands, the “official story” number of 56 radiation-related deaths is the one most conveniently used in news stories and public statements. The explosion of thyroid-related conditions and surgeries is minimized by the terse clinical observation that this is somehow acceptable, since it is “relatively easy” to provide treatment for thyroid disorders. The stories of the 800,000 liquidators receive little attention these days, and their diseases and suffering are relegated to “stress” and “nuclear phobia” – as if these would have existed absent the nuclear disaster.

High-priced, slick documentaries abound, claiming the “recovery” of wildlife in the Contaminated Zone. These often “forget” to mention that much of this alleged recovery can be attributed to the near-total absence of the apex predator – mankind. They further fail to mention the numerous studies showing the opposite is actually true when one examines in greater depth the overall health and reproductive capabilities of many of the remaining wildlife inhabitants of The Zone that aren’t good photogenic subjects for heartwarming documentaries – the insects, bacteria, fungi, plant species, etc., which make up the base of the web of life in the region.

Ignoring the rhinoceros in the living room – the current de facto civil war raging in Ukraine – the Kyiv-based Ukrainian government continues to insist that it will build an additional 13 nuclear reactors [9] on top of the 15 currently in operation in a nation on the cusp of war and self-annihilation -- some of which were under threat during the hotter hostilities. Apparently, the phrase, “loss-of-offsite-power” accident has not yet been translated into Ukrainian.

THE U.S. (LACK OF) RESPONSE POST FUKUSHIMA/CHORNOBYL

One should not get the erroneous impression that the “SCUM” phenomenon applies solely to Japan and Ukraine. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and the nuclear industry here have contributed heavily to the list of lessons-not-learned and missed opportunities to improve safety. Consider:

- Going against the recommendations of its hand-picked expert analysis team making post-Fukushima “lessons-learned” recommendations, the NRC **denied** an emergency

interveners 2.206 petition which called for safety improvements in the 24 U.S. reactors of the same design that melted down and blew up at Fukushima – four of which are in Illinois. These improvements would have added filtered vents (which *were* added to European and Japanese reactors after the Fukushima meltdowns) to keep radioactive materials inside the plant during meltdowns; and improvements to the emergency cooling systems for the “spent fuel pools” containing the reactor’s spent fuel. [10]

- The NRC also delayed for years the implementation of several other “lessons learned” recommended by NRC staff.
- After the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, regulators insisted that there were no lessons to be learned here in the U.S. because the U.S. utilities did not operate any reactors of the design type of Chernobyl, which NRC deemed inferior to U.S. designs. After the Fukushima disaster, in which three U.S.-design GE boiling water reactors widely used in the U.S. melted down and exploded, the NRC insisted that lessons were not applicable to the U.S. because the Japanese had modified these designs and operated them differently than is done in the U.S.
- In December 2012 NRC whistle-blowers revealed that the NRC had been covering up the severity of accident potential from floods at U.S. reactors downstream of dams.[13]
- In August 2015 the NRC rejected another recommendation emanating from the high-level task force it convened after the March 2011 Fukushima disaster which called for making Severe Accident Management Guidelines for reactor emergency response planning for Fukushima-level emergencies mandatory at nuclear reactors, stating the staff recommendation did not meet a strict cost-benefit standard. [12]
- In September 2015 the NRC abruptly cancelled a cancer study [11] it had commissioned with the National Academy of Sciences to definitively determine the health impacts of living near nuclear reactors. The Academy had already done considerable work in this direction when NRC terminated the study, claiming it would not be “cost effective” to obtain this definitive answer.
- Most recently seven NRC nuclear engineers felt compelled to file an emergency 2.206 safety-related petition with their superiors at NRC after uncovering a safety flaw found in 98 of 99 U.S. reactors which has existed since the reactors were built. Their concerns and recommended actions **were denied two times previously** by NRC officials higher in the chain of command. This forced the NRC engineers to file as “citizen petitioners” rather than as NRC employees to bypass the NRC regulatory obstruction. The condition was first identified **at Exelon’s Byron Illinois nuclear station in 2012**. In spite of the fact that the safety condition persists, and is of a concern level that **NRC regulations require that the reactors be fixed or be shut down**, NRC has taken no action to implement the fixes four years after being reported. [14]

Historically, repeated instances like these show that NRC has demonstrated a near anaphalactic-allergic response to assertive regulation of the U.S. nuclear industry – so much so that critics insist that NRC must stand for “not really concerned.” This abdication of regulatory responsibility comes to the detriment of protecting the U.S. public and the environment.

A former senior aide to the Commission bluntly observed [15] in 2012, that the “[C]ommission and that agency [NRC] were complete and total captives of the nuclear industry. One and the same.”

The one and only “lesson to be learned” from the nuclear disasters at Fukushima and Chernobyl is that – this is what you get when the regulators stop regulating. Perhaps these anniversaries suggest – or warn -- it is time to do major house cleaning at the NRC, and establish a truly independent regulator that will make public health and safety its prime concern – before we’re forced to start observing more such anniversaries here in the U.S. ■

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