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Tokyo Didn't See Tsunami Risk, Report Says

TOKYO—Regulators and operators in Japan failed to fully anticipate the dangers posed by a giant tsunami, leaving the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear-power plant overwhelmed by the March 11 disaster, a fact-finding team from the International Atomic Energy Agency said in its preliminary report Wednesday.

The global nuclear watchdog, based in Vienna, also indirectly criticized the Japanese government for the lack of a fully independent nuclear



Franck Robichon/European Pressphoto Agency

IAEA fact-finding team leader Mike Weightman of Britain—checking out the plant last week, below, and talking with the press Wednesday.

Michael Weightman, chief nuclear inspector of Britain and head of the IAEA mission said

regulatory agencies "are not only independent in structure, but also in the resources and the expertise that they have available to them."

He spoke to reporters after handing the team's preliminary report to the Japanese government.

Critics of the current system have noted that Japan's main regulator, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, is part of the trade ministry, which is charged with promoting sales of nuclear-power systems overseas.

The IAEA also recommended greater international assistance for plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co., or Tepco, which is trying to bring the plant to a safe condition by year end. A number of U.S. and French companies are already working with Tepco, providing technology and equipment for radiation measurement and decontamination.

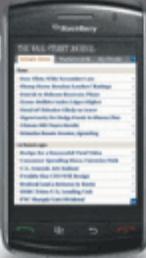
Overall, the report said the on-site response to the nuclear accident was "exemplary, particularly illustrated by the dedicated, determined and expert staff working under exceptional circumstances."

It also said the government, regulators and plant

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problems with the government's response. "The report contains constructive proposals," said Goshi Hosono, special adviser to Prime Minister Naoto Kan on the crisis.



IAEA/Associated Press

Mr. Weighman inspecting the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant last week.

The report bolsters the position of officials from the government and plant operator Tepco that it was the 14-meter (46-foot) tsunami that caused the flooding of the facility, rather than the magnitude-9 quake. The report noted that the plant could only withstand a tsunami of 5.7 meters.

"In terms of the cause, it is clear. The direct cause was a tsunami, associated with an earthquake, of tremendous size, which not only devastated many parts of Japan, but also these sites, and took out the ability to cool the reactors," Mr. Weighman said.

He said, however, that he hasn't figured out why a country so excelled in earthquake prediction has so spectacularly failed in predicting giant tsunamis. "Perhaps, their methodologies or data didn't allow them to predict that this size of tsunami could occur," he said.

Mr. Weighman said it is possible to predict the consequences of natural disasters and take them

generally supportive of its conclusions. Keiji Miyazaki, professor emeritus in reactor engineering at Osaka University, agreed the tsunami was the main cause of the crisis, although he said there was too little on the causes of the partial meltdowns of the reactor core at the three operating units.

"There must have been ways to prevent the damage from spreading so much. I was disappointed that the IAEA didn't press on this issue further," he said.

The investigation was conducted amid revelations that the government and Tepco were busy trying to place responsibility on each other for the most crucial decisions made immediately after the March crisis erupted.

In one instance, Tepco management decided to wait for government approval before injecting seawater into a reactor that was overheating and desperately needed cooling, although this decision was ignored by Tepco staff directly dealing with the crisis.

"Normally, we look for a more simple approach, more local judgmental decisions," Mr. Weighman said as he called for a decentralized organizational structure to allow quick decision-making in times of emergencies.

During a 10-day mission that started May 24, the 18-member team, comprising 12 experts from various countries and six IAEA staff members, held hearings with officials of key regulatory agencies. They conducted on-site inspections of three nuclear plants located on the northeastern coast.

The report also noted that the risks of hydrogen explosions should be evaluated more fully with mitigation systems put in place. Explosions at the

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Japan's trade minister, Banri Kaieda, is expected to attend.

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