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Fukushima: Construction Team, in 50s, Cleared the Way



Tokyo Electric Power Co./Reuters

The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant reactor no. 4, center, and no. 3, left, shown on March 15.

When construction firm Hazama Corp. was approached to help deal with the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, it assembled a team of seasoned, experienced civil engineers for the job. Very experienced — all seven of them were in their 50s.

“We decided we didn’t want to send in young engineers,” said the leader of the seven-member Hazama team in

an interview at the company’s headquarters in Tokyo. “(Because walkie-talkies were the only mode of communication available at the accident site early on,) we knew front-line engineers and workers would get cut off from people in the on-site war room and would not be able to seek guidance. We knew we wanted engineers who could make decisions on the spot on their own.”

Said another senior team member: “Given the enormity of the accident, veteran nuclear plant civil engineers knew right from the start that they would be dispatched. But assembling a team was another matter.” For three of the seven Hazama people who the company chose to send in, it was their first nuclear accident. (None of the dispatched Hazama employees wanted their names revealed.)

The purpose of their mission that began on March 15, day four of the crisis: clear and repair roads at the scene so that responding emergency units, from Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, the Tokyo Fire Department, and the riot-control unit of Tokyo Police, could operate their heavy equipment and vehicles more freely inside the debris-strewn accident site hit by the tsunami and explosions.

Here’s how it unfolded, step by step:

March 15: Hazama starts assembling a team. Hazama’s office in Sendai decides to dispatch four people, including the team’s leader who has experience in working at nuclear accident sites. The Tokyo head office sends in another three



Yomiuri Shimbun/Reuters

A Japan Air Self-Defense Force helicopter collects water from the ocean to drop on the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Fukushima March 17.

people and two backhoe excavators. A Hazama subsidiary sends seven backhoe and trailer operators. None of these equipment operators has prior experience with nuclear accidents. The team arrives at a staging center, located some 20 kilometers from the accident site, around 10:30 p.m.

March 16: Roads from the staging center to Fukushima Daiichi have been so severely damaged that the team sends out a small surveillance unit shortly after midnight. The team sets out for Fukushima Daiichi around 3 a.m., driving mostly on Route 6 but taking a few detours. The team and the equipment arrive at Fukushima Daiichi shortly after 4 a.m. The team, however, has to stand by, in part because of high levels of radiation, and remains idle through the day and night, waiting inside the war room – a building near the reactors that houses Tepco’s accident response team and others. There are some 300 to 400 workers inside the building, all dressed in protective gear and some sleeping in the hallways.

March 17: Engineers and operators set out around 2:30 a.m. and work for an hour to clear debris on roads and repair roads around Reactors Five and Six but goes back to the war-room building to make way for Self-Defense Forces helicopters which try to pour water on some reactors’ fuel storage pools. Hazama engineers and operators go out again to the Nos. 5 and 6 reactors to continue clearing debris and repair roads around 10 a.m. During the night, the team works on roads around Reactor One, again clearing debris and

repairing roads.

March 18: Back at Reactors Five and Six in the morning, clearing and repairing the access roads. A second team from Hazama arrives around 8 a.m. The first team leaves for Tokyo around noon.

The Hazama chiefs said they reassured equipment operators by promising that they would put safety as their first priority. “We asked Tepco to provide its own on-site civil engineer and a radiation measurement specialist every time our team went out. We told them safety is our priority, and that we would leave the job as soon as we see any sign of danger.”

Still, “some of us, working at a nuclear accident site for the first time, were a bit scared and uneasy at first,” one of Hazama’s first team leaders said. “But we saw the bravery of many Tepco workers, some of whom were locals who said they wanted to restore control at Fukushima Daiichi and save their town. We all, including our equipment operators, were taken by this, and in the end when we said farewell we shook hands and told them ‘we would return soon.’”

The Hazama team arrived back in Tokyo in mid afternoon on March 18. One of the first things they did was to buy new underwear and clothes and head out to a public bath house near Tokyo Station, taking their first bath in four days. Afterward they raised a toast with beer.

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