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In Nuclear Crisis, Crippling Mistrust



Reuters

The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, damaged by a tsunami on March 11, became the site of the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl, as workers successfully ward off a complete meltdown, but could not prevent the release of considerable amounts of radioactive material.

By NORIMITSU ONISHI and MARTIN FACKLER
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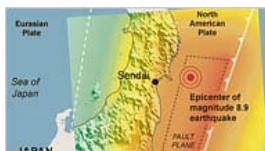
TOKYO — On the evening of March 12, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant's oldest reactor had suffered a hydrogen explosion and risked a complete meltdown. Prime Minister Naoto Kan asked aides to weigh the risks of injecting seawater into the reactor to cool it down.

At this crucial moment, it became clear that a prime minister who had built his career on suspicion of the collusive ties between [Japan's](#) industry and bureaucracy was acting nearly in the dark. He had received a confusing risk analysis from the chief nuclear regulator, a fervently pro-nuclear academic whom aides said Mr. Kan did not trust. He was also wary of the company that operated the plant, given its history of trying to cover up troubles.

Mr. Kan did not know that the plant manager had already begun using seawater. Based on a guess of the mood at the prime minister's office, the company ordered the plant manager to stop.

But the manager did something unthinkable in corporate Japan: he disobeyed the order and secretly continued using seawater, a decision that experts say almost certainly prevented a more serious meltdown and has made him an unlikely hero.

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Timeline: A Nuclear Crisis**MARCH 11**
2:46 p.m.

A powerful earthquake strikes off Japan's coast.

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Tokyo Electric Power Co., via Reuters

MASAO YOSHIDA The manager of the power plant, he ignored orders to stop pumping seawater into a reactor to cool it, an act of defiance that may have prevented many deaths.

Tepco.

"There were delays. First of all, we weren't getting accurate information from Tepco," said Kenichi Matsumoto, an adviser to Mr. Kan. But Mr. Matsumoto added that the prime minister's distrust of Tepco and bureaucrats "interfered" with the overall response.

The early disarray alarmed the United States government enough that it increasingly urged the Japanese to take more decisive action, and to be more forthcoming in sharing information. Making matters worse was Mr. Kan's initial reluctance to accept the help of the United States, which offered pump trucks, unmanned [drones](#) and the advice of American nuclear crisis experts.

"We found ourselves in a downward spiral, which hurt relations with the United States," said Manabu Terada, a lawmaker who served as an aide to Mr. Kan at that time. "We lost credibility with America, and Tepco lost credibility with us."

Lack of Experience

Even some supporters say that Mr. Kan could have moved faster and more decisively if he had used Japan's existing crisis management system.

The system was created in 1986 and subsequently strengthened by Japanese leaders who had sought more power for the prime minister. Modeled on crisis management in the White House — even down to the Situation Room under the prime minister's office — the system brought together bureaucrats from various ministries under the direct command of the prime minister, said Atsuyuki Sassa, the head of the Cabinet Security Affairs Office in the late 1980s.

Critics and supporters alike said Mr. Kan's decision to bypass this system, choosing instead to rely on a small circle of trusted advisers with little experience in handling a crisis of this scale, blocked him from grasping the severity of the disaster sooner. Sometimes those advisers did not even know all the resources available to them.

The convoluted drama has exposed the underlying rifts behind Japan's handling of the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl, which eventually resulted in explosions at four of the plant's six reactors. Mutually suspicious relations between the prime minister's aides, government bureaucrats and company officials obstructed smooth decision-making.

At the drama's heart was an outsider prime minister who saw the need for quick action but whose well-founded mistrust of a system of alliances between powerful plant operators, compliant bureaucrats and sympathetic politicians deprived him of resources he could have used to make better-informed decisions.

A onetime grass-roots activist, Mr. Kan struggled to manage the nuclear crisis because he felt he could not rely on the very mechanisms established by his predecessors to respond to such a crisis.

Instead, he turned at the beginning only to a handful of close, overwhelmed advisers who knew little about nuclear plants and who barely exchanged information with the plant's operator and nuclear regulators. Struggling to manage a humanitarian disaster caused by the tsunami, Mr. Kan improvised his government's response to the worsening nuclear crisis, seeming to vacillate between personally intervening at the plant and leaving it to the operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, known as

"First Class" freaks

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Kantaro Suzuki contributed reporting.

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