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The Black Box of Japan's Nuclear Power 日本原子力発電の「ブラックボックス」

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Japan's *Mainichi Shimbun* recently described Japan's nuclear industry and regulatory organs as a "black box" – an apparatus with visible inputs and outputs but no way to see its inner workings. A recent series of reports from the *Mainichi* and *Asahi*, which, together with the *Tokyo Shimbun* have leveled the sharpest mainstream media criticisms of TEPCO and the Japanese government, describe a climate of secrecy and collusion that reveals the continued power of Japan's "nuclear village". The five articles reproduced below were published between May 24 and May 26. They reveal a series of "secret" meetings between government officials, nuclear company representatives, and regulators that excluded critics of nuclear power among regulators and at which no minutes were kept. Transparency and collusion have come to the fore as major issues since the 3.11 disasters. In the immediate aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi meltdowns, it was revealed that regulators, politicians and TEPCO had repeatedly ignored warnings about the plant's general safety and about tsunami resistance specifically. The *Mainichi* and *Asahi* reports reveal continued collusion and a lack of transparency as Japan moves toward nuclear restarts. The revelations have thrown the regulatory authorities into confusion and empowered the critics of nuclear power.

'Secret meeting' on fuel cycle was like gathering of 'nuclear villagers'

May 24, 2012 (Mainichi Shimbun)

Original article here

A preposterous scene was recently played out behind closed doors in central Tokyo. A secret meeting on Japan's policy for its nuclear fuel cycle, dubbed a "study meeting," was held in the Kasumigaseki district on April 24. Government officials and businessmen from the power industry, who are supposed to draw a sharp line between the two sides, enjoyed chatting and laughing with one another. It was something like a gathering of "nuclear villagers."

A mysterious document was distributed to each participant. The Mainichi's reporting team later found out that the document was in fact the original draft report that was to later be presented to the subcommittee of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC).

Shortly after 5 p.m. on April 24 -- at conference room 743 on the seventh floor of the Central Government Building No. 4 -- a reporter witnessed men in business suits filing into the conference room one after another through doors that were kept open. They were all pro-nuclear people from JAEC, the Cabinet Office, the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy in the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan, Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., Tokyo Electric Power Co., etc. There was no one there who was opposed to or cautious about the use of nuclear power.

Holding a pile of documents under his arm, a man in a blue shirt entered the room and put the documents on a desk somewhat roughly. He divided the documents into two piles because if he put them in one stack, it could crumble. One of the piles was about 20 centimeters high and the other about 10 centimeters. It was later found out that the documents were the original draft report for the "Technical Subcommittee on Nuclear Power, Nuclear Fuel Cycle, etc." The draft report was actually discussed at a subcommittee meeting 14 days later.

Two officials from the Cabinet Office distributed one set of the documents to each participant sitting at desks arranged in a square shape. Sitting near the doors, a top official of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency (JAEA), which operates the prototype fast-breeder reactor Monju, was poring over the documents. Soon afterwards, the participants started chatting with one another. When one of the members criticized Tetsunari Iida, a staunch opponent of nuclear power and head of the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies (ISEP), by name, the participants burst into laughter.

At 5:10 p.m., the doors to the conference room were closed quietly and the secret meeting kicked off. According to sources concerned, a top official of Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., which operates the reprocessing plant in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, asked other participants to accept the concurrent approach of "reprocessing and directly disposing of spent nuclear fuel," which could help the firm survive. According to the sources, he stressed that "if the Rokkasho facility were to be abandoned and spent nuclear fuel were to be disposed of directly, problems would occur here and there." If the reprocessing business at Rokkasho fell apart, it is said that about 2,919 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel will have to be hauled out of the storage facility in Rokkasho.

The subcommittee presented its report containing the "Overall Evaluation" full of expressions in favor of the concurrent approach to the "council of new national energy policy" on May 23. An industry ministry official condemned the report, saying, "Even if spent nuclear fuel is reprocessed, waste must eventually be disposed of. At a time when the government and bureaucrats need to come together and toil to create permanent disposal facilities, they are pushing for a policy that will only delay the inevitable."

When the Mainichi reported in its morning edition on May 8 that an agenda item for the "council of new national energy policy" headed by JAEC Chairman Kondo Shunsuke had been covered up because it stood in the way of reactivating idled nuclear reactors, Kondo said "there was no problem." But in light of what happened at the secret meeting, the same excuse will never be acceptable.

When a Cabinet Office official, acting as an official of the secretariat for the council, distributed the agenda item for the council entitled "(Nuclear power's) Coexistence with local communities" to the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, the Federation of Electric Power Companies and others concerned, he was told that, "Should they include Shiga Prefecture (which is cautious about reactivation of idled nuclear reactors)? If so the council meeting will be bogged down." Then, the agenda item was withdrawn.

While insisting that it was inappropriate to hand it out to power suppliers, Kondo said, "That was not an agenda item but a memo. If it was an agenda item, it should have been arranged in a Power Point format ... The secretariat sent it out through e-mail by mistake."

But the original draft report distributed at the secret meeting came in a Power Point format. Furthermore, it was distributed not by e-mail but it was handed out directly to people from the power industry at the meeting. When the cover-up issue was pointed out earlier this month, Goshi Hosono, the state minister in charge of nuclear accidents, stood behind Kondo. We will see how Hosono will respond to this latest scandal.

Yoroku: Dismantling the 'black boxes' of Japanese nuclear power

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May 25, 2012 (Mainichi Shimbun)

Original article here

A device that spat out chocolate if someone deposited 100 yen into a coin slot could fit the definition of what is known in science and engineering as a "black box" -- a system whose inputs and outputs are visible, but not its inner workings. Inside the facade may be your standard vending machine, a magical contraption that transforms metals into chocolate, or even a human being.

A couple of months ago, Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), operator of the stricken Fukushima nuclear power station, announced that the water level in the No. 2 reactor containment vessel was only 60 centimeters deep. What's going on inside the crippled reactors remains unknown for the most part. In other words, the nuclear disaster has created its own "black boxes" whose input is cooling water and whose output is highly radioactive water.

Japan's nuclear safety administration, which downplayed the risks of a serious nuclear disaster and failed to take measures against a massive tsunami and loss of power, is responsible for bringing these troublesome black boxes into existence. It's only natural that the nuclear policymaking process dominated by the "nuclear village" -- the name given to the nation's pro-nuclear collection of politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and utilities -- has come to be looked upon with great suspicion.

Now, another black-box scandal in nuclear policymaking has emerged.

It was recently reported that the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC) held a secret meeting on April 24, before a JAEC subcommittee compiled and submitted a report on the country's policy of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel to the "council of new national energy policy" on May 23. The discussion, dubbed a "study meeting," took place behind closed doors, with only pro-nuclear parties from government and power industry bodies invited to attend. The chief of the JAEC subcommittee was also in attendance.

If the JAEC merely needed to hear the opinions of power companies, they could have held a public hearing. News of what could be seen as further collusive activity by the "nuclear village" -- and what could be interpreted as the "village" flaunting its indifference to the fact that it is already the target of widespread distrust -- is maddening the public.

It is said that the black boxes at the Fukushima plant will take decades to decommission. But the black box that spawned the nation's nuclear policy can be dismantled today. ("Yoroku," a front-page column in the Mainichi Shimbun)

Ties remain tight between Atomic Energy Commission, nuclear industry

May 26, 2012 (Asahi Shimbun)

Original article here

Officials are showing no signs of ending the cozy relationship that persists between the nuclear industry and safety regulators, despite rising criticism following last year's disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

In the latest uproar over the “nuclear village,” the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC) was found to have revised a report that keeps alive the nuclear fuel recycling program after a closed-door meeting attended exclusively by the pro-nuclear camp.

The JAEC held an extraordinary meeting on May 25 and flatly dismissed allegations that the report was intentionally rewritten to favor specific operators or opinions.

JAEC Chairman Kondo Shunsuke told a news conference after the meeting that he thought the practice of holding meetings with electric power companies should continue.

"(Meetings with utilities) have certainly been effective for calculations and other purposes, but it should be thought over whether they should be held in the same manner as before," Kondo said.

The JAEC has held as many as 23 closed-door meetings since November, and Kondo attended four of them. The meetings gave electric power operators access to information, under Kondo's approval, over the heads of other JAEC commissioners.

The latest closed-door meeting was held on April 24, around the time a JAEC technical subcommittee was entering the final stage of discussions on the future of the nation’s nuclear fuel cycle policy.

The 30 or so participants at the meeting included JAEC Vice Chairman Suzuki Tatsujiro, a senior official of Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. (JNFL), which operates a spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, and a senior official of the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan.

Draft material distributed at the meeting asserted that "direct disposal of all spent fuel" was "more advantageous in terms of overall costs" than two other options presented--reprocessing all spent fuel and a combination of direct disposal and reprocessing.

"Direct disposal" means burial in the ground, and applying that method to all spent fuel would eliminate the need for a reprocessing plant.

But during the April 24 meeting, the senior JNFL official called for the continuation of the reprocessing plant operations.

In the subsequent JAEC subcommittee meeting held on May 8, the assessment had been revised to say that direct disposal of all spent fuel was "likely more advantageous" in economic terms. The weakened expression was more favorable for a continuation of the reprocessing plant operations.

Public trust in Japan’s nuclear industry has evaporated since the accident started at the Fukushima plant. The government is reviewing its energy policy to move the nation away from its dependence on nuclear energy, and it was under pressure to lay bare the cozy relations in the nuclear village.

The revelation that the JAEC, the nation's highest authority handling nuclear power, was standing on the side of nuclear energy proponents prompted criticism from lawmakers of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan.

One former Cabinet member said a JAEC official should be summoned to the DPJ’s Policy Research Committee to explain what happened.

The Fukushima nuclear crisis led to an organizational revamp at the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), which had its director-general replaced, and the Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan, which will be integrated with NISA into a new nuclear regulatory body.

But the JAEC structure has remained intact.

The practice of convening closed "hearings" and other sessions only with pro-nuclear companies and officials dates back to the days

before the Fukushima accident, the JAEC secretariat said.

"(These closed meetings) were an occasion to ask for expert data and knowledge," Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujimura Osamu told a news conference on May 25. "I don't see any problem with it."

But Hosono Goshi, the environment minister who is in charge of the nation's nuclear power policy, indicated that he would consider reviewing the organizational setup, in which employees of electric power companies are sent on loan to the JAEC secretariat.

(This article was compiled from reports by Yamashita Go, Koike Ryuta and Nishikawa Jin.)

Atomic commission chief admits attendance at secret session on nuclear fuel cycle

May 25, 2012 (Mainichi)

Original article here

Kondo Shunshuke, chairman of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC), attended a closed-door meeting on a review of the nation's nuclear fuel cycle policy on Dec. 8 last year, according to memos obtained by the Mainichi Shimbun.

The revelation comes after the JAEC was found to have held closed-door "study" sessions with only pro-nuclear members in attendance. The JAEC held such secret sessions over more than 20 occasions, and an official of the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, which is in charge of research and development of fast-breeder reactors, also participated.

The commission, which is overseen by the Cabinet Office, did not produce minutes of those secret meetings, and after each session, Cabinet Office officials in charge of nuclear policy were tasked with retrieving the many materials that had been distributed.

Following the finding by the Mainichi, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujimura Osamu told a news conference on May 25 that the JAEC held 23 closed-door meetings from last November to April this year and that Chairman Kondo attended the first four sessions.

According to memos written by participants in the Dec. 8 meeting that Chairman Kondo attended, the gathering was held from 4 to 6 p.m. in a conference room of the Cabinet Office. The JAEC held the meeting ahead of full-scale discussions from January by its subpanel on Japan's nuclear fuel cycle policy regarding how to dispose of spent nuclear fuel.

Besides Kondo, participants included JAEC Vice Chairman Suzuki Tatsujiro; Commissioner Akiba Etsuko; an assistant division chief of the science ministry; Kayama Hirobumi, director of the Office for International Nuclear Energy Cooperation at the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy; Namura Kimihide, director of the Radioactive Waste Management Policy Office at the agency; Tanaka Harukuni, managing director at Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., which operates an atomic fuel cycle facility in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture; and senior officials of the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan -- made up of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency, which manages the prototype fast-breeder reactor Monju, and other electric power firms.

All participants were proponents of nuclear power and there were no opponents or skeptics present at the meeting.

Interviews with people familiar with the meeting and a subsequent probe found that the JAEC held more than 20 secret meetings, including one on April 24 this year in which copies of a draft report on the assessment for options on how to dispose of spent nuclear fuel were distributed ahead of the subpanel's meeting and representatives of the electric power industry sought revisions in their favor.

Under an unwritten rule, distributed documents were collected after each session and minutes of those meetings were not prepared. Some participants scribbled memos on the content of the secret meetings and the names of participants and e-mailed them to selected parties.

The JAEC organization has a chairman and four other members, and the JAEC law stipulates that the commission can convene meetings attended by the chairman and two other members and exercise voting rights.

Kondo has said his commission has refrained from holding debate on nuclear policy among three or more commission members to ensure transparency, but acknowledged that he attended the Dec. 8 secret meeting with two other commission members. However, he maintains he did not do anything wrong because it was a study meeting to provide data and seek explanations from participants.

Mainichi uncovers more secret nuclear commission meetings

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May 26, 2012(Mainichi Japan)

Original article here

The Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC) held secret "study" meetings on the nuclear fuel cycle project in 2004, internal documents obtained by the Mainichi Shimbun have shown.

The revelations come just days after the Mainichi news team discovered similar secret meetings held over 2011 and early 2012, with the latest on April 24. The government has invested vast sums in the badly delayed nuclear fuel cycle project, which foresees reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel into MOX fuel to be burned in special reactors.

The 2004 meetings, attended only by those in favor of the project, were held on 10 occasions up to April that year, while the JAEC was working out the current atomic power policy outline.

JAEC Chairman Kondo Shunsuke is quoted in one of the documents as telling attendees at a January 2004 meeting that the panel would immediately stop such meetings if they came to light, demonstrating the commission's desire to cover up the secret discussions, which documents now show had been going on for some eight years.

Kondo denied that he had said the secret sessions would be stopped if they were exposed.

"We did hold study sessions, but we never distributed a list of issues on the agenda. Instead, we only studied examples of nuclear power policy overseas, and there's no problem with that. I never made such a remark (about halting the sessions), but I told attendees to be careful."

One of the documents is titled, "The second study session on nuclear energy." It shows the meeting was held at a government office building from 8 to 10 a.m. on Jan. 29, 2004.

Among 15 people listed as attendees are Chairman Kondo; Yasui Masaya, then director of the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy's nuclear policy division; Watanabe Itaru, then head of the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry's nuclear energy division; and senior officials of Tokyo Electric Power Co. and Kansai Electric Power Co. Panel members critical of the nuclear fuel cycle project were not present.

It was in this meeting that the document says Kondo told attendees that the meetings would be discontinued if they were revealed.

Another document is a record of the seventh such session held on March 11 of the same year.

During the meeting, attendees discussed whether fast-breeder reactors should be operated on a commercial basis.

A member representing the government asked if electric power companies would operate fast-breeder reactors. An attendee representing the industry expressed reluctance to do so, saying, "We can't do it unless it's profitable."

The government representative then countered by insisting that power suppliers should operate such nuclear reactors, according to the document.

The nuclear policy outline adopted by the Cabinet in 2005 states that the government will aim to introduce fast-breeder reactors on a commercial basis sometime around 2050.

The documents show that session attendees not only examined relevant data, but also that only pro-nuclear members discussed key parts of Japan's nuclear energy policy behind closed doors.

It earlier came to light that similar meetings were held to review the nuclear fuel cycle project as part of a new nuclear energy policy outline to be worked out as early as this coming summer.

A source at the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry familiar with the case lamented that government and industry officials involved in nuclear energy had remained unchanged even after the meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

"When I heard that preparations for the new policy outline were being made secretly only by those in favor of nuclear energy, I thought the culture had not changed since the nuclear disaster," he said.

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