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Former Fukushima Governor Sato Eisaku Blasts METI –TEPCO Alliance: "Government must accept responsibility for defrauding the people"

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Translated by Julie Higashi

The explosion at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant has become an earthshaking situation, severely damaging the surrounding area. In addition, highly radioactive ocean water has been detected nearby. Sato Eisaku (佐藤栄佐久 age 71), who at one point brought 17 nuclear power plants operated by the Tokyo Power Electric Company (TEPCO) to a halt, is indignant about the situation: "The root of all evil is the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the government."

Every time I see news about the accident, I cannot help but feel anger rise in me. Some of the pundits have said, "This is an accident beyond all expectations. It is a natural disaster," but do not be fooled. This accident was doomed to happen. In other words, it is a man-made disaster.

During my tenure as governor of Fukushima prefecture, I fought hard against METI, demanding a transparency guarantee on accident information and working to secure the prefectural government's rights with regard to where nuclear plants are built. METI is supposed to supervise and instruct TEPCO so as to prevent TEPCO's repeated tampering with and concealing of information, but instead, the two organizations have been working together. Judging from the news reports, I think the situation has not changed at all.

Sato, whose face remains calm as he speaks, lives in Koriyama City, Fukushima Prefecture. More than two weeks have passed since the earthquake, but the scars remain vivid, with the ruins of stone walls still littering the ground. Sato, initially a proponent of nuclear energy, became skeptical about Japan's nuclear energy policy in 1989, the next year he became governor.

On January 6 of that year, we discovered that an accident had occurred in reactor unit 3 at the Fukushima Daini Nuclear Power Station. Part of a recirculation pump (for the reactor core coolant) had fallen off. However, TEPCO not only continued to operate the plant, even after the warning alarm had gone off at the end of the previous year, but the organization also concealed this fact. The prefectural and municipal governments were the last to receive this information. How can this be allowed to go unchallenged?

The people who need to receive this kind of information first and foremost are the locals. Through the vice governor, I fiercely protested to METI (then Ministry of International Trade and Industry, or MITI), but we received no response from them whatsoever.

Most members of the National Dietcannot touch Japan's nuclear energy policy, because it is the Cabinet's exclusive prerogative. Even the minister, who is in charge of the policy, is largely controlled by the government office. In other words, METI and the Cabinet's Nuclear Energy Commission, the so-called "people of the nuclear power plant village," decide the entire direction of policy. Neither politicians nor local governments where the power plants are built have any authority.

According to Sato, the government and the electric power company not only kept local municipalities in the dark about nuclear power plants but they also concealed evidence of an accident, which Sato terms "8.29." On August 29, 2002, the Fukushima prefectural office received a fax from an informant inside the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA). It contained a terrifying message: "For many years, TEPCO has tampered with inspection records to cover up the malfunction of and cracks found in reactors ofthe Fukushima Daiichi and Daini nuclear plants."

I immediately ordered my subordinate to investigate. We later found out that NISA had received the same information two years earlier but, instead of conducting any investigation, had simply routed the information to the concerned party, TEPCO.

At this point, my anger reached its peak. This is like the police and thieves working together. Until then, I had thought TEPCO was in cahoots with the government, but the real evil deep within the electric company, remained hidden. The ultimate problem is with METI and the government.

As a result of this scandal, the president of TEPCO and five top executives resigned. In April 2003, all the power plants TEPCO operated were forced to shut down their nuclear reactors (10 in Fukushima Prefecture and 7 in Niigata Prefecture; link). However, neither NISA nor METI received any punishment or ever accepted any responsibility.

On the contrary, the manager of METI came to Futaba County, where the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station is located, to distribute pamphlets that said,"Nuclear power plants are absolutely safe," to all households. How shameless can one be?

Even now, TEPCO staff and the spokesman of NISA, who appear unsure about the situation, are the only ones who bow their heads in apology at their press conferences. The people who told everyone that nuclear power plants are safe are in hiding yet again.

Furthermore, Sato is feeling a sense of impending crisis in the wake of the March 14 hydrogen explosionin reactor unit 3 at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, a"pluthermal" facility.

Why don't the mediacover this issue prominently? The generation of "pluthermal" power involves plutonium and uranium mixed-oxide fuel (MOX fuel) extractedfrom spent nuclear fuel. For a country that depends on imports of uranium, "pluthermal" is the core of the

nuclear fuel cycle plan.

With Pluthermal, A Crisis Remains in Fukushima

At one point in 1998, I agreed to the use of MOX fuel, on condition that four requirements of quality control be followed.

Three years later, however, I rejected the plan. This was because data falsification about the planned use of MOX fuel came to light at the Daiichi and Takahama nuclear power plants in Fukui Prefecture, where the pluthermal program was to be implemented.

Moreover, the nuclear fuel cycle plan has a major flaw. The reprocessing plant in Rokkasho Village in Aomori Prefecture has experienced numerous technical problems, and completion of the plant has been repeatedly postponed. Unless this plant can begin full operations, Fukushima will need to continue holding used spent fuel rods inside its nuclear reactor's pool. The pool in reactor unit 3 may have been damaged during the recent earthquake. Consequently, the danger remains.

On August 30, 2010, the prefectural assembly endorsed the decision of the current governor of Fukushima Prefecture, Sato Yuhei, to accept the "pluthermal" power-generation plan. This news received extensive media coverage. However, how widespread was the news that completion of the Rokkasho Village reprocessing plant would be postponed yet again for the 18th time, this time for two years? (Link)

Because of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station accident, metropolitan Tokyo has experienced a power cut. In April 2000, Tokyo's governor Ishihara Shintaro, announced at the Japan Atomic Industrial Forum annual conference that he "wouldn't mind if nuclear power plants were built in Tokyo Bay." I wonder whether he would say the same thing today, given the current situation.

In 2006, I was arrested by the Special Investigation Department of the Tokyo District Prosecutors Officefor bribery in connection with plans to construct a dam ordered by the prefecture. At an intermediate appeal hearing, the judge delivered an interesting ruling, stating that "the amount of bribery is zero." I am currently fighting these false accusations in court. From this experience, I can say that the people in the Special Investigation Department and at the "nuclear power village" are very similar. The Special Investigation Department leaked information about the structure of relationships behind the crime to the media and they continue to fabricate an image of me as a criminal.

The current accident, too, can be viewed as a cover-up and as an example of the withholding of vital information from the public. It is high time that the government took responsibility for defrauding the people.

Sato Eisaku was born 1939 in Koriyama City, Fukushima Prefecture. He graduated from Tokyo University's School of Law and was elected governor of Fukushima Prefecture in 1988. In 2006, after stepping down as Governor, he was arrested and charged with bribery by the Special Investigation Department of the Tokyo District Prosecutors Office. In 2009, he was found guilty and sentenced to two years (with a probation period of four years). But given that the bribery amount was set at zero, the verdict virtually clears the charge. Currently, he is making a final appeal. Author of Chiji Massatsu *[Obliterating the governor] (Heibonsha, 2009).*

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