Nuke disaster's clear lesson

'Safer is nowhere near safe enough'

By H. PATRICIA HYNES and ABBIE JENKS

My Turn

Until the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant disaster on March 11, 2011, the Japanese people were complacent about nuclear power. Today, with food-chain contamination, radionuclides in marine sediment, and more than 100,000 evacuees living in financial, legal and existential limbo, a revolution in public attitude is taking place there.

One civic group is well on its way to collecting 10 million signatures to eliminate all commercial nuclear reactors in Japan. The Catholic bishops of Japan recently called for "immediate abolishment" of all nuclear plants in the name of intergenerational justice.

Survivors of the atomic bomb, known as hibaksha, have pioneered campaigns against nuclear weapons, but never against nuclear power. In June 2011, the national assembly of hibaksha debated and voted for a phase-out of nuclear power.

All but three of Japan's 54 reactors have been offline for maintenance and safety tests since the Fukushima meltdown, without any energy blackouts. Japan's trade minister asserts that with ongoing conservation, Japan can continue this summer without nuclear power. "Reality on the ground," he says, "is moving ahead of policy."

Fukushima opened a "Pandora's box" of ills and risks. Highly radioactive spent fuel rods are now exposed to the outside environment; and, according to a recent geological study, another similarly strong earthquake could strike the area again in a reactivated fault nearer to Fukushima.

The makeshift system to cool the stricken reactors and spent fuel generates immense quantities of radioactive water in need of treatment and radioactive waste with no storage or disposal system in place. In the government's worst-case scenario — kept secret until recently — further explosion and fuel rod meltdown could have caused massive radioactivity to reach Tokyo, whose 35 million residents would have had to be evacuated. A December 2011 commissioned assessment of Fukushima concludes that the plant's operator, TEPCO, and the national government were scandalously unprepared to manage the crisis.

This brings to mind our own government's response to Fukushima. The U.S. cautioned American citizens within a 50-mile radius of Fukushima to evacuate; yet here the Nuclear Regulatory Commission mandates only a 10-mile evacuation radius.

The nuclear watchdog, Union of Concerned Scientists, has documented that the NRC continues to tolerate 47 nuclear reactors operating with known fire regulation violations and 27 reactors operating where seismic hazards exceed the plants' seismic protection. Which federal agency is designated responsible for emergency response in a nuclear disaster? According to Congressman Ed Markey of Massachusetts, no single agency is in charge.

Can a nuclear catastrophe like Fukushima happen here? "We are," responds nuclear expert Arnie Gundersen, "one major earthquake, tornado or flood away from disaster." Twenty-three U.S. nuclear reactors, including Vermont Yankee, have the same flawed General Electric Mark 1 design as the now crippled Fukushima reactors.

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The key lesson from Fukushima is that catastrophic risk — no matter how low its likelihood with improved design, siting, materials, safety systems and trained operators — is inherent in nuclear power. Not only is the industry a mammoth welfare recipient, with multi-billion-dollar taxpayer subsidies, loan guarantees and catastrophic insurance, it also survives through cost-cutting and deferred maintenance as citizens in the three states endangered by Vermont Yankee have learned.

It's time to close all 23 Fukushima-like GE Mark 1 reactors, fast-track safety measures at the remaining nuclear plants, and launch a renewable energy revolution.

To that end, there is "human chains against chain reaction" — citizens holding hands in lines that stretch for miles will form in countries throughout the world on March 11 in a global call to forsake nuclear power and pursue renewable energy technologies.

Here at home, there is widespread effort to decommission Vermont Yankee power plant. Ongoing vigils are held, affinity groups are forming and nonviolent training sessions in preparation for future actions are being organized.

Citizens across the area are stepping up. Young people, in particular, are recognizing what is at stake for their future and students from the Greenfield Community College Peace, Justice and Environmental Action Alliance and Fungi Affinity group, have organized Powershift, where on March 3, students will walk 17 miles from Greenfield to Vermont Yankee to protest its continued unsafe operation. They are part of the growing global community to end the dangerous and toxic nuclear presence in our world. Will you join them?

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