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Perspectives

Mainichi scoop on Mongolia's nuclear plans highlights problems in dealing with waste

One of the candidate sites for a nuclear power plant in Mongolia is pictured in April 2011. There is no source of water needed to cool down reactors as the lake in the center of the photo has dried up. (Mainichi)

Coverage on a secret document detailing an international nuclear waste disposal site that Japan and the United States had planned to build in Mongolia, for which I won the Vaughan-Ueda Memorial Prize for 2011, has highlighted the difficulties in dealing with radioactive waste.

The secret plan surfaced as the crisis at the tsunami-hit Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant has stirred controversy over the pros and cons of nuclear power.

I learned that the Japanese Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry and the U.S. Department of Energy had been secretly negotiating the plan with Mongolia since the autumn of 2010 when I interviewed a U.S. nuclear expert on the phone on April 9, 2011.

"Would you please help the Mongolian people who know nothing about the plan. Mongolia is friendly to Japan, Japanese media certainly has influence on the country," the expert said.

I flew to Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia, on April 22, and met with then Ambassador Undraa Agvaanluvsan with the Mongolian Foreign Ministry in charge of negotiations on the plan, at the VIP room of a cafe.

Before I asked the ambassador some questions getting to the heart of the plan, we asked my interpreter to leave the room just as we had agreed in advance. The way the ambassador talked suddenly became more flexible after I stopped the recorder and began asking her questions in English. She explained the process and the aim of the negotiations and even mentioned candidate sites for the disposal facility.

After the interview that lasted for more than two hours, the ambassador said she heard of a similar plan in Australia and asked me to provide Mongolia with any information on it, highlighting the Mongolian government's enthusiasm about overcoming competition with Australia in hosting the disposal facility.

I subsequently visited three areas where the Mongolian government was planning to build nuclear power stations. Japan and the United States were to provide nuclear power technology to Mongolia in return for hosting the disposal facility. I relied on a global positioning system for driving in the vast, grassy land to head to the sites. All the three candidate sites, including a former air force base about 200 kilometers southeast of Ulan Bator, are all dry land. No source of water indispensable for cooling down nuclear reactors, was found at any of these sites and a lake at one of the sites had dried

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up.

Experts share the view that nuclear plants cannot be built in areas without water. I repeatedly asked Mongolian officials responsible for nuclear power policy how they can build nuclear plants at the sites without water. However, they only emphasized that all the three sites meet the safety standards for nuclear plants set by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

An Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry official, who is familiar with Mongolian affairs, said, "Mongolians are smart but their knowledge of atomic energy isn't that good ..."

In other words, Japan and the United States proposed to build a spent nuclear waste disposal facility in Mongolia, a country that has little knowledge of nuclear energy.

In 2010, the administration of then Prime Minister Naoto Kan released a new growth strategy with special emphasis on exports of nuclear power plants. However, there is no facility in Japan that can accept spent nuclear fuel, putting itself at a disadvantage in its competition with Russia, France and other countries that have offered to sell nuclear plants and accept radioactive waste as a package.

A Japanese negotiator said, "The plan to build a disposal facility in Mongolia was aimed at making up for our disadvantage in selling nuclear power stations."

The United States wanted to find another country that will accept spent nuclear fuel that can be converted to materials to develop nuclear weapons in a bid to promote its nuclear non-proliferation policy.

Mainichi correspondent Haruyuki Aikawa, right, interviews an energy expert in London on March 2, 2012. (Mainichi)

Both the Japanese and U.S. ideas are understandable. However, as Mongolia has just begun developing uranium mines and has not benefited from atomic energy, I felt that it would be unreasonable to shift radioactive waste to Mongolia without explaining the plan to the Mongolian people.

During my stay in Mongolia, I learned that many people there donated money equal to their daily wages to victims of the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. I was also present when the Mongolian people invited disaster evacuees from Miyagi Prefecture to their country. I could not help but shed tears when seeing the Mongolian people's goodwill. My interpreter even joked, "You cry too much."

I did not feel a sense of exaltation from learning the details of the secret negotiations on the disposal site. I rather felt ashamed of being a citizen of Japan, which was promoting the plan.

The Fukushima nuclear crisis that broke out following the March 11, 2011 quake and tsunami has sparked debate on overall energy policy. Some call for an immediate halt to nuclear plants while others insist that such power stations are indispensable for Japan's overall energy, industrial and security policies.

"The matter isn't limited to nuclear energy. Our generations have consumed massive amounts of oil and coal," a Finish government official said.

The Mainichi scoop on the secret plan sparked campaigns in Mongolia to demand that the plan on a spent nuclear fuel disposal facility be scrapped and that relevant

information be fully disclosed.

Bowing to the opposition, Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj declared in the U.N. General Assembly session in September last year that the country can never host a radioactive waste disposal facility.

Yukiya Amano, director general of the IAEA, which is dubbed a "nuclear watchdog," says, "Those who generate radioactive waste must take responsibility for disposing of it. It's unfair to expect someone else to take care of it."

However, human beings have yet to find a solution to problems involving nuclear waste. (By Haruyuki Aikawa, Europe General Bureau)

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