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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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Report from Japan Nuclear Power's Future in Doubt Amidst Fukushima Crisis By Richard Wilcox

"The Fukushima nuclear disaster is one of the greatest industrial disasters of modern times – brought about by people who promised 'safety,' who should have known better, and refused to listen to anyone with a differing opinion. The level of complicity, duplicity, stupidity, and lack of humility and human sympathy, boggles the mind." – Tony Boys, ecologist and farmer who lives 75 miles downwind from the Fukushima disaster.

About two months have passed since the great earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan, which was followed by the level 7 nuclear accident at the Fukushima No. 1 power station.

What progress has been made to stabilize the dangerous situation since then? The major question of cooling the reactors is still far from solved. Given the high levels of radiation in the reactor buildings, workers cannot just prance in there while listening to Bach on their iPods and turn a few nuts and bolts. A few weeks ago, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) admitted it would take 6 to 9 months to stabilize the situation, and Toshiba, another company involved with the facilities, said it would take 10 years to decommission the power station. Yet, cooling the reactors is fraught with difficulty as they presently try to cool the No. 1 reactor. "Workers have already pumped in more than enough water to fill the containment vessel, but they have not actually seen a rise in the water level. ... [W]hen workers increased the amount of water pumped into the containment

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Travels to Kabul and Teheran From Earthquake to Stasis

By Patrick Cockburn

As popular uprisings convulse the Middle East and North Africa, governments across the world wait nervously to see if any other country will experience an explosion of popular rage against despotic rule. In the wake of the Japanese earthquake, there is also a more general curiosity about which places on earth are most vulnerable to a similar calamity.

The answer to both questions could well be Afghanistan, and, in particular, Kabul: hitherto an island of calm compared to the turmoil elsewhere in the country. The potential for natural and political disaster in the capital, which exists almost as an independent city state, is seldom realized by the myriads of diplomats, intelligence officers, soldiers, aid workers, and journalists who live there. They are in Afghanistan only because of the war with the Taliban, and they focus very largely on matters relating to the conflict. Much of the media reporting is taken up with accounts of firefights between embattled U.S. and British patrols and local guerrillas in the mud-brick villages of Helmand and Kandahar provinces.

The preoccupation with the military and political struggle means that little attention is given to the fact that Kabul is situated in a geologically unstable zone close to the Chaman Fault and has been shaken by severe tremors in the past. One extension of the fault ends only six miles from the capital. Any sizeable earthquake will be catastrophic because over the last decade Kabul has been the fastest growing city in the world. Its population has tripled from about 1.5 million at the time of the Taliban defeat in 2001 to about 4.5 to 5 million today. The increase is so big because of the return of refugees from

Pakistan and Iran, flight from the turmoil in the rest of Afghanistan, and the naturally high Afghan birth rate.

The spectacularly rapid unplanned growth of Kabul means that the Afghan capital is at risk of suffering a disaster that will have nothing to do with the Taliban. Government officials estimate that three quarters of the city's houses, home to three million of its people, have been illegally built and are unsafe in the event of an earthquake.

The extent of the problem is visible from much of the capital. The city was built at the bottom of a narrow valley and is overlooked by mountains and hill-tops. These are increasingly covered with newly constructed jerry-built houses clinging precariously to steep slopes so close to the vertical as to be almost cliffs. A tremor of any strength would bring them tumbling down. The best parallel here is probably not Japan but the earthquake in Port-au-Prince in Haiti in 2009, where there had also been a surge of people moving from countryside to the city slums. When the earthquake struck, the poorly built houses collapsed, killing 250,000 people.

People in Kabul are vaguely aware of the threat from earthquakes, but they are entirely engaged in the struggle to survive from day to day. This is getting more and more difficult and explains why everywhere in Kabul one finds exactly the same sort of rage against the corruption, incompetence and brutality of the Afghan government as is expressed by Arab protesters against their own regimes.

This detestation of the government is quite different from support for the Taliban, though popular contempt for the authorities gives the insurgents the

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political oxygen with which to breathe. It was a real estate dealer in Kabul, not a religious fanatic, who told me in a burst of fury, "There is bound to be a revolution if things go on as at present." He explained that for a small well-connected ruling class Kabul is a gold-rush town, where it is easy to make a fortune quickly, but for most of the population it is a polluted, crowded, overpriced shanty town.

The way money is made in Afghanistan today is often misunderstood abroad. It does not only come from the opium or heroin business, or even through corruptly obtained foreign-funded government contracts. As foreign money has flooded in since 2001, the Afghan cities – not just Kabul – have expanded rapidly, but not rapidly enough for the number of people trying to live there. "Rents are five times higher here than in any of the neighboring capitals, such as Islamabad, Dushanbe or Tehran," explained Wahdat Aatifi, the owner of the Zhundun Real Estate company.

The notorious "poppy palaces," supposedly built with the profits of the drugs trade, are frequently cited by journalists as symbols of pervasive corruption. In reality, these hideous mansions are often paid for by the equally obscene profits accruing to the "land mafia," led by former militia commanders and politically

well-connected power brokers who have seized control of state property. In addition, they purchase luxury villas in Dubai while ordinary people in Kabul try to live crammed, ten to a room, in houses in the center of the city, or far up the sides of the mountains, where they are without electricity, fresh water, or access by roads.

In one sense, the natural disaster brought on by over-rapid expansion of the Afghan capital has already started. Kabul has become one of the most polluted places on earth. Clouds of brown smog make it difficult to see the sun clearly. This is so toxic that the Afghan government has advised people to wear masks over their face during the rush hours. Three quarters of the pollution comes from vehicles. As the population of Kabul has increased, so has car ownership, but Afghans own cars of a peculiar kind. Almost all are not only second-hand, but are reconstructed car wrecks from the U.S.A. and Germany, often imported through Dubai. These cars use a poor grade of petrol and belch out fumes, which are trapped in the valley in which Kabul is built.

If life is so bad in Kabul, why do people keep coming there? Many new arrivals say they had no choice but to take refuge in the capital because, for the moment, it is relatively safe and they are fleeing for their lives. Not far from the Intercontinental Hotel in south Kabul I spoke to a group of some 870 refugees, trying to survive in huts and tents. They turned out to be Pashtun farmers from Helmand who had fled U.S. air strikes. Several had lost legs, and one man took off his dark glasses to show his mutilated face and sightless eyes. Their leader, called Rahmatullah, who, like many Afghans, only uses one name, said it was too dangerous to go home, "The Afghan government and the Americans rule during the day, and the Taliban by night." If the air strikes did not get them, the insurgents would.

Kabul is full of sad stories. Not far away from the camp of the Pashtun farmers stand the gaunt ruins of a vast presidential place, badly damaged during the civil war in 1990s, which is now inhabited by former nomads known as the Kouchi. They explained that they had been forced out of their homes at gunpoint by men working for the brother of a powerful member of the government. They believed he wanted their land to build on,

and when we visited the place where the Kouchi had once lived, we could see large villas, each worth \$300,000-\$400,000, already under construction.

The Taliban is primarily a rural Pashtun insurgency and, aside from Kandahar, never seems at home in the Afghan cities. This is fortunate for the U.S.A. and its western allies, oblivious or uncaring about discontent among Afghans, unless it is directly linked to fuelling guerrilla war. Their unconcern may be shortsighted. It would not take much for the jobless, poorly housed Afghans suffering from rising prices and preyed on by a government of racketeers to rise up with the same fury as protesters in the Arab world.

Stasis in Teheran

"Sit long enough by the river, and the corpse of your enemy will float by," runs an old Middle Eastern proverb. For Iranian leaders, the truth of this saying has been repeatedly proved as the Arab Awakening unexpectedly overthrew or weakened their enemies across the region. As recently as January, the White House was satisfied that it was gradually tightening the noose around the neck of Iran, as it imposed ever more severe sanctions. But within three months, without Iran doing anything, U.S. policy was in fragments. One stalwart of the anti-Iranian alliance, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, was in hospital under arrest, and another, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, had plenty to worry him close to home, in Bahrain and Yemen. Urging an aggressive U.S. policy toward Iran, the king had once advised Washington "to cut off the head of snake," but as revolution sweeps the Arab world, the U.S.A. is loosing whatever small appetite it ever had for a confrontation with Iran.

This does not mean that the U.S. government does not think about how the present turmoil is affecting Iran. As the White House debates the extent of its military engagement in Libya, senior officials never forget that what happens to Col. Muammar Qaddafi's regime is a sideshow compared to America's long-drawn-out struggle with Iran that stretches back to the overthrow of the shah in 1979, the U.S. Embassy hostages, and Ayatollah Khomeini. The U.S. support or lack of it for pro-democracy uprisings in the Arab world always takes account of how far this hurts or benefits

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its main enemy in Tehran. For example, the violent crushing of the majority Shi'a population in Bahrain by the Sunni monarchy, backed by Saudi troops, is winked at by the U.S.A., Britain and France, because a democratic Bahrain might be more sympathetic to Shi'a Iran.

Some western pundits suggest hopefully that the revolutionary wave will spread to Iran. Iranian opposition spokesmen, mostly operating from abroad, speak of thousands of baton-wielding riot police and militiamen confronting weekly street protests in cities across Iran. However, so far the reality has been much tamer. When I was in Tehran in February and early March, there were few signs of demonstrators, though police were milling about in large numbers. The government had been surprised on February 14, when 30,000 supporters of the Green Movement, born at the time of the allegedly fixed presidential election of 2009, had taken to the streets. The number of demonstrators has since dwindled. "Unfortunately, the outside world is making a mistake by exaggerating the importance of these protests," an Iranian journalist, usually sympathetic to the Greens, told me. "The problem is that the picture of what is happening in Iran these days comes largely from exiled Iranians and is often a product of wishful thinking or propaganda."

The severity of the repression shows that the regime is worried, but this does not necessarily mean that it is under serious threat. The Iranian government invariably overreacts to any kind of dissent, denouncing the protesters in lurid terms as traitors and pawns of the U.S.A. and Britain, who aim at the destruction of the Islamic Republic. Given that Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader and successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, is God's representative on earth, it follows naturally that opposition to him and his policies is nothing less than an assault on Islam.

In reality, political developments are for the moment going in the opposite direction to the Arab world, where state power is crumbling or under threat. In Iran, the authority of the state is being concentrated and strengthened. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – the pious, populist, authoritarian Iranian leader, first elected in 2005 – is seeking to create an imperial presidency by eliminating other centers

of power. He adeptly used the mass demonstrations against his supposed victory in the 2009 election, widely believed to be fraudulent, to crush his opponents and rivals. The two embattled leaders of the Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, already under house arrest, are now being ever more closely confined. They are prevented from communicating with the outside world by phone or the Internet, and their families can no longer meet them. But the regime appears to have decided to isolate rather than imprison them, to avoid turning them into martyrs and provoking a reaction on the streets.

Bleak for Secular Reformers

Power in the Islamic Republic has traditionally been fragmented, particularly since the death in 1989 of Ayatollah Khomeini, the fount of all authority in the first decade after the revolution. Rivalry between Iran's different political and religious elites has been continuous. Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, has never had anything like Khomeini's uncontested authority. As a result, there has been a twenty-year-long struggle between those demanding a more democratic and secular state and those wanting a more militarized and Islamic government. This battle seems to be near conclusion, and the future is looking bleak for secular reformers.

The establishment had been split. Mousavi and Karroubi both represent the reformist trend, but neither was previously an out-and-out radical: Mousavi was prime minister of Iran from 1981-89, before leaving politics to sculpt and paint, while Karroubi served two terms as speaker of parliament. The distribution of power between different centers and personalities is no longer tolerated. Important politicians who supported the Greens in 2009 are today being forced to denounce the renewed demonstrations on February 14. Neutrality or silence is no longer tolerated by the regime. Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, for three decades one of the chief power brokers of Iran, is coming under escalating attack from Ahmadinejad's supporters. He has been compelled to give up his post as head of the Council of Experts, the clerical body which chooses the Supreme Leader. Other signs of his influence being chipped away are the brief detention of his daughter, for taking part in protests,

and the resignation of his son as head of the Tehran metro.

Iran is portrayed abroad as being controlled by the Shi'a clergy, but, though it may be a theocratic state, it is a very strange one. Ahmadinejad and his closest associates are not clerics. In elections, he presents himself as the anti-establishment candidate, the friend of urban and rural poor. His ideology is a blend of Shi'ism and Iranian nationalism that is frequently more hard line than that of the senior clergy. The son of a blacksmith, he is a former officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and of the generation whose attitudes were shaped by Iran-Iraq war in 1980-88, in which half a million Iranians were killed and wounded. Reverence for the self-sacrificing religious and nationalist commitment of the men who fought in the trenches plays the same role in determining the mentality of many Iranians as did the First World War in Europe in the 1930s.

Ahmadinejad is better able to crush protests than Arab leaders because, unlike them, he has a core of fanatical supporters. Some Egyptian officials

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commented on this at the height of the Tahrir Square protests. This support is organized in powerful bodies such as the IRGC and the Basij militia, which may be a million strong. He has the backing of hard-line mosques, though he is suspected by many clergy of subtly ignoring their views. The greatest threat to his position comes not from the protesters but from Ali Khomeini and political leaders who backed him against the Greens but fear his monopolizing power.

The Greens and the radical reformers look too weak to take on the forces of the regime. They have a reasonable claim to be the real winners of the election in 2009, and when demonstrations were at their height, as many as three million people protested. But the number of militant reformers is far smaller than this. Many Iranians are discontented but do not necessarily hate the regime so much that they will risk the grim consequences of opposing it. Support for the reformers is becoming difficult to mobilize because media sympathetic to them has been taken over or closed down and information favorable to their cause comes increasingly through foreign-based militants, or the BBC and Voice of America in Farsi.

All the same, the desire for change is not going away. Iran remains a country deeply split by the revolution of 1979, just as the French Revolution divided France for 150 years. A reason why the regime is so edgy when confronted by even small demonstrations is that Iran is the one country in the Middle East where a seemingly all-powerful state machine was overthrown by street protests. The former revolutionaries do not want the same thing to happen to them.

In Tehran in recent weeks, there has been little sense of emergency. The regime sees no hypocrisy in lauding protesters abroad at the same time as it is driving them from the streets at home. The only visible sign of anything out of the ordinary when I was there was the groups of black-helmeted policemen, standing as they wait for demonstrators who mostly fail to turn up. This might change, but so far there is no sign of it.

International sanctions in response to Iran's nuclear program are having an impact, but their seriousness is limited compared to U.N. sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s. The withdrawal of state subsidies for food and utilities, which

was costing the government \$100 billion a year, affects day-to-day life more than any embargo.

Tehran, once one of the cheapest cities in the world to live in, is now becoming much more costly. Prices have risen steeply as subsidies disappear for everything, from electricity, gas and water to foodstuffs, such as flour and cooking oil. People are shocked to find that their utility bills have quadrupled. It is a measure of the government's stability that so far this reform has been carried through without protest. A weakness of the Greens is that the movement, unlike Egypt and Tunisia, has remained largely confined to the educated and the middle class. Demands for political liberty and civil rights from people in north Tehran have never combined with the economic demands of the urban poor in the south of the capital. When it does, the regime will truly have something to be frightened of.

Iran is the one country in the Middle East where a seemingly all-powerful state machine was overthrown by street protests.

On a visit to Teheran in April, I went to see the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini in south Tehran, where there were surprisingly few worshippers. The silver dome over his tomb rises amid minarets and cranes that stood out against the grey sky. The mausoleum seems to be permanently under reconstruction, and part of its interior is still being built.

Not far away is the vast cemetery Behesht-e Zahra, where so many of the soldiers and barely trained militiamen killed in the Iran-Iraq war are buried. It is one of the saddest and most moving cemeteries in the world. Photographs of the young men who died stare out of large glass cases above each tombstone. Beside the pictures are mementos of the war such as a few cartridges or a scarf. Bodies from the war are still being found in the mountains, deserts and marshes of the Iran-Iraq frontier, and are reburied at Behesht-e Zahra. Their remains are a still potent symbol of ideological purity: taking advantage of this, Ahmadinejad had

some of the bodies reburied in 72 public places in Tehran, including dissident strongholds such as university campuses.

Sanctions are making life more difficult for Iranians and have increased the sense of isolation. Money is difficult to get in and out of the country, though this can be done with time and effort. Elaborate arrangements have to be made by importers and exporters to route transactions through Dubai or other entrepôts. Petrol cannot be imported, so the shortfall is made up by converting petrochemical plants, but their product is low grade and produces toxic fumes, adding to the thick clouds of smog that so often hide the mountains just to the north of Tehran. "Why is the world so worried about us being able to make a nuclear bomb," asked one Iranian sarcastically, "when we cannot even build proper refineries to make petrol?"

Iran is a difficult country to know because its recent historic experience is unique: no other country in the region has had a genuine popular uprising that overthrew a whole ruling class. Protesters in Tunisia and Egypt have got rid of unpopular leaders, but it is too early to know if the uprisings will lead to real revolutions or simply a changing of personnel at the top. Ayatollah Khomeini's brand of militant and politicized Shi'a Islam was the main force which overthrew the shah, but it was by no means the only one. The domination of his ideology has never been uncontested, or fully accepted by all Iranians, producing a fascinating culture that is full of contrasts.

There is a deep chasm between the way people are meant to behave and the way they really live. For instance, pre-marital sex remains a taboo, but a recent opinion poll of 7,000 young men and women showed that 55 per cent admitted to having a boyfriend or girlfriend. The real figure is believed to be higher, though it is unclear what proportion of men and women have sex. In restaurants and cafes in central Tehran women wear headscarves, but are otherwise as smartly dressed as in any European capital. A majority of students at the universities are women, and, according to one small businessman, private companies prefer female employees. He said, "They are likely to be better educated than men, work harder, and do not use opium."

If Iran is a country little understood by

the outside world, this is partly the fault of its rulers. By excluding foreign media and tightly controlling Iranian journalists, they create a vacuum of information that is inevitably filled by hostile propaganda. The West has demonized Iran for so long that the country's international image differs little from that of the Taliban when they ruled Afghanistan. In addition, America and Israel – the political culture of both countries requires a ready supply of demons – portray Iran as a great and menacing power on the verge of developing a nuclear weapon. In practice, the best efforts of U.S. intelligence has failed to find any evidence that Iran is developing a nuclear bomb.

The exaggeration of the Iranian threat by its enemies is not unwelcome to Iranian leaders, because it bolsters their picture of Iran as a world power. But this grandiose vision has usually been accompanied by a highly practical sense that Iran's ability to expand its influence on the ground is confined to states that have a Shi'a majority, like Iraq, or a powerful Shi'a community, like Lebanon. Even in Bahrain, which is 70 per cent Shi'a, there is no evidence of Iranian involvement in the uprising despite self-interested and paranoid claims by the Sunni monarchy.

Iran may not be very strong, but its opponents have turned out to be weaker or more stupid than anybody supposed. Some Iranian clerics argue that only divine intervention on the side of Iran can explain the recent developments in the region. Ten years ago Iran faced enemies to the east and west, in the shape of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The U.S. conveniently overthrew both, but its intervention provoked such strong resistance that it ruled out U.S. military action against Iran. Now, without Iranian leaders doing anything, Mubarak is gone and the Saudis are quaking at the uprisings all around them. For all their blood-curdling rhetoric, the Iranian regime does not do much to spread the Islamic revolution. But why should it when, sitting by the river, its leaders have the satisfaction of watching the politically dead remains of so many opponents drift by?

Patrick Cockburn is the author of *Muqtada: Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq*. He can be reached at patrick.cockburn@attglobal.net

vessel, pressure inside the vessel fell, threatening a hydrogen explosion." It is anyone's guess, but is the water leaking down into the ground below the reactor site? What goes in must go out.

Over the last several weeks, the government news outlet, NHK World, has reported about the contamination of water that has been sprayed onto reactors and difficulties in attempting to remove water and its storage; the leaking of highly radioactive water into groundwater and the ocean; contamination of land, crops and even breast milk in areas in the vicinity, and dangers to residents in Fukushima; ongoing problems and potential dangers with the reactors due to damaged fuel rods, breaches in containers and the weakened state of the reactors themselves; and problems with the No. 4 spent fuel rod pool, which holds enormous amounts of radioactive waste. More hopeful news is that "[w]orkers have begun a plan to ... install equipment

Because of the disaster, Japan's hitherto unquestioned imperative of economic growth is finally being challenged.

that will help to cool down the reactor ... [it] is designed to filter out 95 per cent of the radioactive substances in the air coming through the ducts..." A main obstacle has been high radiation in the work areas, which has prevented rapid progress.

Japan also continues to bolster safety measures that are badly needed to back up generators in case of another large earthquake or power outage. Many small steps toward progress are being made, but the question remains whether the 9-month plan can be met on time. Seismologists are worried of the distinct possibility that another large earthquake could knock out more of Japan's precariously situated nuclear reactors. For example, the Hamaoka power station is located 125 miles southwest of Tokyo. Yet, until recently, "[m]ost nuclear reactors in Japan would fail to achieve a stable condition in the event that all regular power sources are lost, even though plant operators have prepared new backup power sources as well as electric generators amid the crisis..."

Are the Japanese finally waking up?

It is easy to be pessimistic. As a teacher, I have to combat student apathy and unwillingness to think critically. Nothing new there really, we are all the product of media-directed self-obsession with greed, celebrity and inanity. As one thoughtful journalist has noted, "I am afraid that a sharply decreasing number of Japanese people have the mindset and sensitivity for living in harmony with others and feeling compassion toward others as well as the ability to imagine how others suffer."

But because of the disaster, Japan's hitherto unquestioned imperative of economic growth is finally being challenged. A retired politics professor writes that "we must abandon our conventional belief in the necessity of the economy's continued growth. I believe this will have a huge effect, not only on modern society that is supported by science and technology, but also on society's faith in economic growth itself." These kinds of discussions questioning nuclear power can be heard more often these days from Japanese TV news commentators and panels and read in the op-ed columns of Japan's newspapers.

Osaka journalist, Kosuke Hino, who has investigated Japan's "closely-knit nuclear establishment" for years, provides a searing critique of industry arrogance, but also of our own complicity: "The excuses made by the organizations involved go to show that so-called nuclear power experts have no intention to self-reflect or admit their shortcomings. It was this self-righteousness – evidenced over the years in the industry's suppression of unfavorable warnings and criticisms ... that lay down the groundwork for the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant. ... We are guilty of having relegated – up until now – the issue of nuclear energy as a world away, and a field best left to 'experts' ..."

But even a TEPCO vice president has now admitted the disaster was "man-made" and should have been prevented by those in charge. Prime Minister Kan's special advisor for the nuclear crisis has also suddenly quit, which is unusual, complaining that "[t]he government has belittled laws and taken measures only for the present moment, resulting in delays in bringing the situation under control." And because of this some Japanese

are showing their anger. NHK has reported on any number of organized groups of fisherman, farmers, evacuees and the public protesting TEPCO and government malfeasance by marching in demonstrations and holding protests outside TEPCO and government offices. On May Day, Japan's labor unions called for an end to nuclear power. Even though the old clod, Tokyo Governor Ishihara – who blamed the earthquake on the people of Japan, yet is steadfastly pro-nuke – won reelection, Osaka's feisty Governor Hashimoto has vowed to “scrap nuclear-power generation.”

New nuke plants are being reconsidered worldwide, including in India and Italy, while in Germany the complete phasing out of nukes has long been on their agenda. Although U.S. President Obama has remained aloof throughout the crisis, Russian Prime Minister Putin wondered why the Japanese “build their plants in seismic zones”, given the obvious dangers.

Some Japanese Diet members are calling for a shift to alternative energy by abandoning nuclear in favor of solar and wind power. “But the ruling Democratic Party of Japan, which pushes exports of nuclear power technology as part of the nation's economic growth strategy, is reluctant to pursue a major policy change.” Yet even Tohoku Electric Power Company shareholders, out of pecuniary versus moral reasons, no doubt, “want nuclear plants closed.” Interestingly, in Tokyo, where the most people benefit from nuclear power but do not suffer direct consequences as in Fukushima, there is still no call for such measures from Tokyo Electric.

Fukushima: A Nail In The Nuke Coffin?

The skull and crossbones have become a fashion rave in recent years, even seen on toddler's t-shirts. Why can't nuke plants have huge Jolly Roger flag's proudly flying from their station roofs? Below them could read a banner: “**PIRATING YOUR FUTURE FOR PROFIT.**”

Retired nuclear engineer Arnold Gunderson has indicated that even if Fukushima is not the final nail in the coffin, it is a defining moment in an already moribund industry. Indeed, in a fact-filled report from the Worldwatch Institute, entitled “Nuclear Power in a Post-Fukushima World,” revealing statistics and thorough analysis show that

the nuclear industry fails economically because it is costly, inefficient, and heavily reliant on subsidies. “In 2010, for the first time, worldwide cumulated installed capacity of wind turbines, biomass and waste-to-energy plants, and solar power” outpaced “the installed nuclear capacity prior to the Fukushima disaster.” We also learn that the U.S.A., France and Japan are the top three nuclear-powered countries in terms of electricity production; and that 30 countries are operating 437 nuclear reactors in the world, which produce 13 per cent of the world's electricity. Energy expert Amory Lovins stingingly states in the preface, “Since new nuclear build is uneconomic and unnecessary, we needn't debate whether it's also proliferative and dangerous. In a world of fallible and malicious people and imperfect institutions, it's actually both. But even after 60 years of immense subsidies and devoted effort, nuclear power still can't clear the first two hurdles: competitiveness and need. End of story.”

The Beast from Hell

Alas, before the Beast from Hell can die, there is much long-term harm to be rendered. Professor of politics Anthony Hall reminds us: “Hundreds of thousands of tons of highly radioactive spent nuclear fuel rods are stored at nuclear power stations in Japan, U.S.A. and most other nuclearized countries. This form of nuclear waste remains highly toxic for hundreds of thousands of years.” As venerable nuke critic Russell “Ace” Hoffman warned years ago, “There is no known scientific method for the safe storage and disposal of nuclear waste.”

Hall's exhaustive research, “From Hiroshima to Fukushima, 1945-2011,” cites scholarly literature that irrefutably supports the assertion of there being a historical connection and geopolitical strategy to nuclear weapons and power. Hall notes that “[o]ne of the primary motivations for building nuclear power plants in the first place has been to produce the plutonium needed for the construction of nuclear weapons. This overlapping of functions continues yet.” The nuclear proliferation implications of Japan's plutonium and uranium enrichment program are also of concern to watchdog groups in Japan working on nuclear energy issues.

There is the added problem of worker health. Apparently pro-nuke politicians are not volunteering to pitch in with a

helping hand, nor are those of the general public who hypocritically approve of nuclear power. TEPCO announced it is seeking another 3,000 workers, on top of the 1,000 already employed, to work at the dangerously radioactive Fukushima No. 1 power station. Not only is this an atrocious human rights violation but it throws into question how the workers will be able to endure the situation if it lasts for many months, if not years. Workers already suffer mental and physical exhaustion and unhealthy radiation exposure.

French professor Paul Jobin notes that nuclear-reliant France uses contract workers for 80 per cent of their jobs:

“[I]n 2009, Japan's nuclear industry recruited more than 80,000 contract workers against 10,000 regular employees. The initial goal was not necessarily to hide the collective dose, but to limit labor costs. But the fact is that, whether in France or Japan, the nuclear industry nurtures a heavy culture of secrecy concerning the number of irradiated workers. Rumor has it that many of the clean-up workers are *burakumin* [a Japanese social minority group, often discriminated against. *Editors.*]. This cannot be verified, but it would be congruent with the logic of the nuclear industry and the difficult job situation of day laborers..”

The Citizens Nuclear Information Center in Tokyo reports that “[a] characteristic feature of the Japanese nuclear industry is [that] 96 per cent of the total radiation dosage [is] borne by subcontracted workers. Those who have possibly been exposed to large radiation dosages, foreign nationals, and those without a certificate of residence” are not included in epidemiological studies by the nuclear industry.

The Radiation Debate: MEXTed and Miffed

I have studied the radiation readings taken by Japan's ministry of science and technology (MEXT), and found that, indeed, radiation levels in Tokyo have gone up since the Fukushima disaster took place. They remained consistently higher than readings before the explosions at the reactors in mid-March. Also, if one looks at the levels in the far northern and southern parts of Japan, those levels have consistently remained lower than in the Tokyo region.

According to the “Low Level Radiation Campaign,” the evacuation zone in Japan

should be drastically widened. However, I analyzed their statements and found an incongruity in their conclusion. As of April 11, their site reports, "Advice for the people of Japan – Large areas of Japan are contaminated to measured levels around 1 microsievert per hour. This figure is just for Caesium 137..."

LLRC is basing their statements on the MEXT charts and yet this is not proven by those same charts. The only areas with 1 microsievert per hour or higher (in some cases much higher) are around the Fukushima power station, especially the northwest area. What we see from the MEXT site by following the date and region is that, before the Fukushima explosions, normal background radiation was generally about 0.05 microsieverts per hour in most places; after the explosions of mid-March, there was a big spike, including the prefectures around Fukushima. In the closest prefecture to the south of Fukushima, Ibaraki, levels spiked to 1.5 microsieverts per hour, and in Tokyo the highest level reached 0.5 microsieverts per hour. In most places in Japan levels have not been above 1 microsievert per hour, and, if they had, have since gone down. It is true that in Tokyo levels have remained at about 0.2 per hour, as opposed to the previous normal background level of 0.05 per hour. But in other prefectures around Tokyo unusual radiation is almost undetected.

Whether increased radiation in various locations is dangerous or not I will leave it for health experts to debate. That said, I am certainly not inclined to believe nuclear apologists, nor do I want to ingest any more of the damnably unstable atoms than I have to!

At The Site

There are still high levels of radiation inside Fukushima's damaged reactor buildings – upward to 1,120 millisieverts per hour in at least one the buildings. This is vastly higher than radiation levels detected outside the power station itself. Where is it traveling? The Japanese government has still not released all computer data of the "actual radiation measurements at various locations and weather conditions."

Chris Busby, who is an expert in low-level radiation for the European Union, has claimed that Fukushima is releasing 100 terabecquerels per day. On April 13, it was reported that, according to the Nuclear and Industrial Safety

Agency, 370,000 terabecquerels had been released, while the Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan separately estimated the amount at 630,000 terabecquerels. Further, TEPCO estimated that over six days in April 520 tons of radioactive water, measuring 4,700 terabecquerels, accidentally leaked into sea. If we can rely on government estimates, this put the total amount of radiation at about 10-20 per cent the amount released during Chernobyl, while increasing at a possible rate of 100 terabecquerels per day.

Arnold Gunderson claims the greatest dangers are that the Japanese authorities are downplaying the severity of the situation, both in terms of how to fix the power station and the radiation's effects on those living in its vicinity (and farther away, of course). He also suspects that contaminated water is leaking from the power station into groundwater. The bioaccumulation and magnification of pollutants is not only a concern for those living in Fukushima prefecture, but for everyone else in Japan (and the world) who consume food and water from the region. And yet, on the very day that it was announced that the Fukushima disaster was level 7 – the same severity as Chernobyl – the Japanese official in charge was in Fukushima, eating strawberries to promote a festival!

Japan's Economy In The Dumps

Setting aside the worries of when the crisis will subside, recent headlines tell another story:

"Joblessness adding to woes Companies dismissing workers, but most have nowhere to turn"; "Japan's industrial output marks record plunge"; and "Japan's household spending marks record drop". Ironically, just as the Middle Eastern part of the world is entering a prolonged period of geopolitical chaos, can anyone imagine the rogue nuclear state of Israel handing over millions of dollars to help the beleaguered Japanese? Somehow, I don't think so. Yet, those awful Muslims whom so many love to hate have pitched in "100 million dollars to rebuild Japan."

CP

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The Logic of Nonintervention

By Jean Bricmont

Brussels

Another humanitarian, this time against Libya, war has started, and most of the left and the far left, notably in France, are jumping onto the bandwagon. Their argument is quite simple – we must "do something," even if it means "allying with the devil" (the U.S.A., NATO, Sarkozy, etc.), in order to stop "at all costs" the "dictator" from "murdering his own people."

On the anti-war side, we have people who "support" the insurgents but reject military intervention, which is perfectly inconsistent, since the main demand of the insurgents is precisely Western military intervention. The anti-war argument cannot be reduced to slogans and is not just knee-jerk anti-imperialism, as some of the pro-war people seem to believe. First a few facts: what happens in Libya is an armed insurrection; we may like it, find it legitimate, "support" it, but the fact remains that there is no government in the world, democratic or not, that does not suppress militarily armed insurrection. In fact, the main champion of democracy, the United States, with help from NATO allies, brutally suppresses insurrections far away from its own borders.

Once the operation Odyssey Dawn got underway, some Russians and the Arab League expressed surprise to discover that there is no such thing as a mere "no fly zone." U.N. Security Council resolution 1973 was immediately interpreted by the media to mean a license to "go get Qaddafi" and, from then on, anything less than his overthrow will be viewed as a defeat for the attackers. This is unthinkable, since they must maintain their "credibility." So, we are in an all-out war.

This is an American war. They are the ones with the "unique capabilities" to destroy Libyan defense installations and tip the military balance in favor of the rebels. Sarkozy will make every effort to get credit for the war, and the French may have played a role in dragging the United States into the war, but they are obliged to rely almost entirely on the huge U.S. military machine.

Finally, it is pure daydreaming (a spe-

return service requested

cialty of much of the pro-intervention left) to expect the West to overthrow Qaddafi (which they may very well succeed in doing), put the rebels in power, and then leave.

It is not true that the application of traditional, sovereignty-based, international law has been, as the humanitarians maintain, a failure. Throughout the Cold War, a major world war was avoided. And if the principle of sovereignty is abolished, what objections will there be to other countries intervening whenever and wherever they please? When Russia had its own “humanitarian intervention” in Georgia, the West was not enthusiastic, to say the least.

In fact, the main failure of the United Nations has not been that it failed to stop dictators from murdering their own people, but that it failed to prevent powerful countries (or weak ones supported by them) from violating the principles of international law. Now the U.N., far from trying to make up for its failure to accomplish its main mission, that is, maintaining peace through the application of international law, has instead decided, under Western influence, to undertake

a new task – determining which are the good and the bad “humanitarian wars.” Good luck!

Another aspect which is conveniently forgotten by the supporters of humanitarian interventions is militarism: without the huge U.S. military machine, such interventions would be impossible, because it is out of the question to risk too many lives of our troops, and waging a purely aerial war requires an enormous amount of high technology equipment. So, anybody who supports interventions ipso facto supports the existence and continuation of the U.S. military, with its bloated budgets and its weight on the national debt.

There is also the “barricade effect”: each U.S. war incites all the countries, large and small, that find themselves in the sights of the West, from Bolivia to China, to increase their defense spending, and to become more suspicious of Western actions and attitudes. Each intervention by the “international community” fuels a continuing arms race, makes the world less safe, and less of a genuine international community.

In the 1970s, U.S.A. supported military

dictatorships in Latin America that were allowed to “kill their own people” until socialist movements were eliminated and neoliberal policies firmly established. The selectivity of Western “humanitarian” intervention has not really changed, and only certain “dictators” are earmarked for regime change. Some may not even be dictators: Milosevic was elected several times, but he was suspected of harboring traces of Yugoslavia’s socialist past and was demonized and eliminated, with the support of the left. The new “Hitlers” usually have in common either some reluctance to turn their economic policies over to the West or an unfriendly attitude toward Israel. Today’s left seems oblivious to historical and geopolitical factors, and, most of all, to the motives and manipulations of their own governments, who pick and choose which “dictators” to overthrow and how. CP

Jean Bricmont teaches physics in Belgium, and is a member of the Brussels Tribunal. His new book, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, is published by Monthly Review Press. He can be reached at bricmont@uclouvain.be